The WHISPERER

DEC. '41

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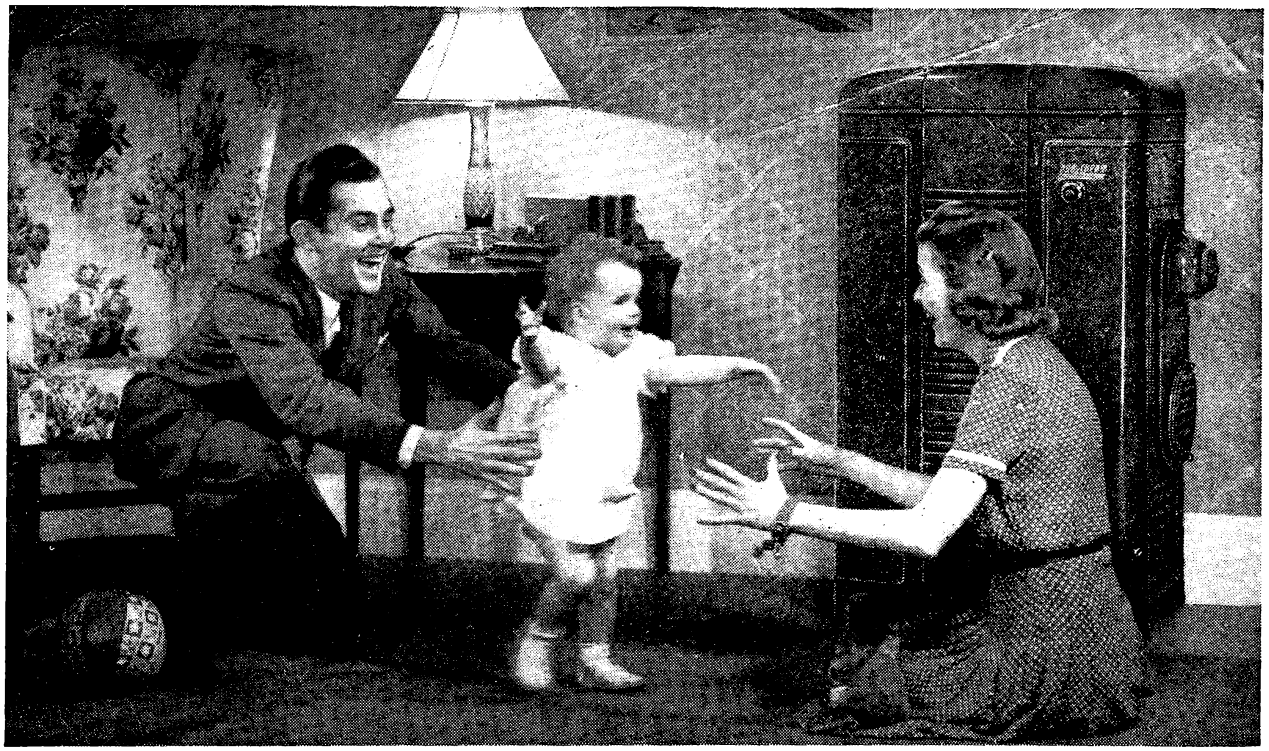

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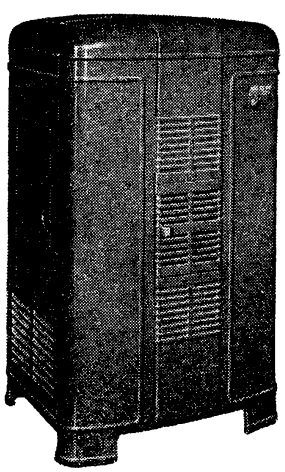

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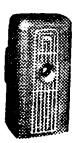

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"THEN I THOUGHT OF MY FLASHLIGHT. There was a chance that other returning hunters might be in the woods. Flashing the bright beam off and on, my efforts were finally rewarded. Thanks to those 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries, two men saw my signal and rescued me from that death trap.

(*Signed*) Ballard Dean"

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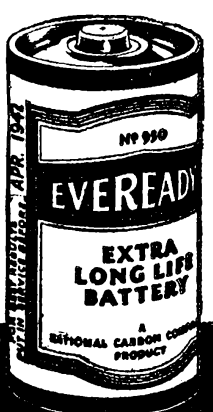

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The WHISPERER

CONTENTS DECEMBER, 1941 VOL. II, NO. 2

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COMPLETE BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

BROTHERHOOD OF DEATH . . . Clifford Goodrich . . 9

New York's Chinatown—wrapped in tales of old, tales of horror and intrigue and sudden death! And from the grave rise tales anew; once again the tiny yellow spot echoes the cry of tong war and the furtive menace of hatchet men. But now, brother seeks his brother's blood, and enemies battle side by side. The Whisperer alone realizes the treasure at stake; realizes that through one man's power lies the starvation of an entire nation. And he is willing to risk his own life so that a great country may live and grow strong.

NOVELETTE

THE SHADOW NOOSE . . . . . Norman A. Daniels . . 97

To Detective Jim Preston it was weird to see old Bundy running down the stairs with a severed hang noose about his throat. It was even more so when he saw the shadows on the wall —and found that an hallucination can break a man's neck!

THRILLING STORY AND FEATURE

COME HOME AND DIE . . . . . Gary Barton 83

Death had followed Sue Adams from war-torn Europe—death more menacing than the bombs over London, the destruction of Paris, the intrigue of Lisbon. And back here in the States it was Jerry Langdon's job to protect her from a murderous spy ring, all the time not knowing that Sue *herself* wasn't a spy!

WITH THE WHISPERER 6

What others think about our magazine, plus interesting notes regarding our future plans.

COVER BY HUBERT ROGERS

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

Bimonthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Allen L. Grammer, President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President; Gerald H. Smith, Secretary and Treasurer. Copyright, 1941, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.

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WITH THE WHISPERER

Wildcat Gordon, the police commissioner who has learned that it is often necessary to forget red tape in order to accomplish the ends of justice, finds much use for his other self as The Whisperer in the case that comes before him in "The Brotherhood Of Death." There are so many things that the police could do if their hands were not tied; but their hands must be tied, in most of such cases, for the general good. It is to protect the innocent, even if the guilty get away, that most of these laws are prepared, and the reason is a very just one. We cannot let each individual officer of the law act as his own judge and jury. Even if, in most cases, he would be fair and just, there is always the chance for error, for making an innocent person suffer, and society just doesn't want things that way.

Every time Wildcat Gordon takes the law into his own hands, it is not as the police commissioner, but as The Whisperer, a character who is definitely on his own, and who is wanted just as much by the police as by the underworld. That makes things more exciting, and makes these stories more interesting. You'll find Wildcat Gordon's attempt to solve the puzzle of "The Brotherhood Of Death" a really engrossing story. Start it on page 90.

You'll really enjoy the novelette and the exceptional shorter story which are in this issue. The novelette, "The Shadow Noose," is by Norman A. Daniels, who is one of our best mystery writers. The short story, "Come Home and Die," is an exceedingly well-told tale presenting a situation which will make you feel every bit of the suffering that the hero must face. You'll like them both.

"Suicide Trail" is the title of the novel which comes to you in our next issue. It's a very unusual story, presenting a situation which will certainly get your curiosity up on its hind legs.

Why should young men—men who are clean-cut, active Americans; men who have had excellent training, both from a standpoint of home life as well as training to make their own way in the world; men to whom a great opportunity has just been offered—why should such men suddenly decide to commit suicide? They have no reason for such action. No difficulties in their personal lives; no enemies; no sense of failure, for they are hand-picked for jobs which have every opportunity for advancement. These men have every reason to live—yet they die, by their own hands!

Or so it would seem. But not to Wildcat Gordon. Even though the police can uncover no evidence to prove otherwise, the very perfection of such suicides arouses Wildcat's special interest, and he sets out on the trail as The Whisperer to see what might really be behind all this.

What he finds out is amazing—and it gives him one of his toughest battles so far. Any villain who is clever enough to commit such crimes so neatly is clever enough to put up a stiff battle, and this one does.

Don't miss our next issue. You'll like it, and your friends will enjoy

Continued on page 82

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Don't envy trained Radio Technicians because of their good pay, pleasant work; because everybody admires their knowledge and skill. Mail the Coupon. Learn about the increasing demand for Radio Technicians and Operators. See the opportunities in Radio today because of the millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders placed with the industry, on top of a tremendous demand for Radio sets and equipment for civilian use. Learn how men train at home nights and become Radio Technicians. Get the facts about the "Radio Night School Which Comes to You." Mail coupon now.

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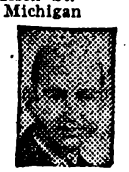

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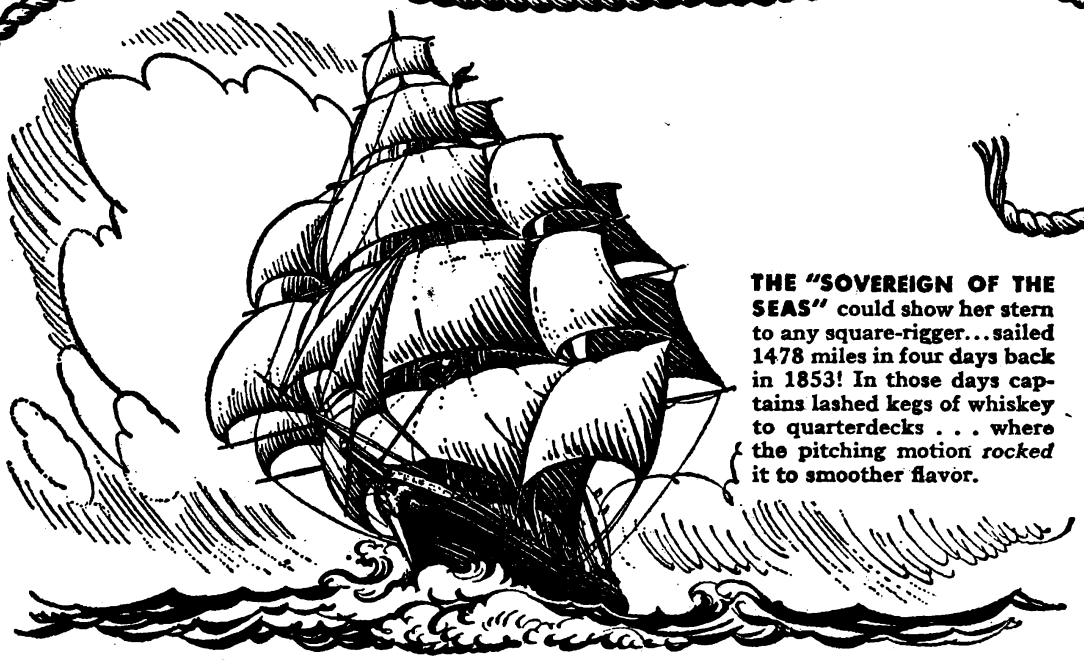

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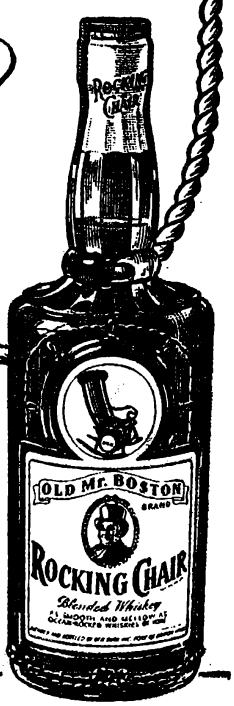

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BROTHERHOOD OF DEATH

By Clifford Goodrich

A Complete Whisperer Novel

One man held the power to starve an entire nation. And The Whisperer was willing to risk his own life so that a great country might live and grow strong.

The chunky, slant-eyed man was obviously panic-stricken. He scrambled out of the subway kiosk like a frightened animal, whirled once as if to get his bearings, then reeled unsteadily toward the broad door of police headquarters.

"I . . . I must get there!" he gasped.

"I must see honorable commissioner."

He winced in obvious pain and switched to soft, slurring tones in Chinese. Fresh determination seemed to drive him, and he stumbled in his haste. This attracted much attention. The hour was two in the afternoon, and Centre Street was packed with men and women. The crowd split, as if an invisible wedge had been driven into it. Women wrinkled their noses in distaste.

There was about the reeling, scurrying figure an acrid stench of smoldering cloth and singed hair. One of his arms was twisted in a grotesque, macabre fashion. The fingers were blackened, and wisps of smoke drifted from his clothes.

Many persons were watching, now. Later, some of them remembered seeing a smaller figure approach the chunky one at the very door of headquarters. But such was their absorption with the smoldering, pain-racked figure that no one could later describe the little man.

One or two persons did see him whip out an instrument that looked amazingly like a perfume atomizer. He squeezed the bulb close to the face of the fat one. Instantly, the racing man gasped and began to choke. He clutched at his throat, gave a strangled cry and plunged the rest of the way into headquarters.

There was one thing, however, that passers-by did remember. There was a peculiar odor, an odd, sweetish smell, somewhat like flypaper that has been spread out under a hot sun. It seemed to follow the fat Oriental, to blend with the stench of burning clothes. A squeal of pain and terror came from his lips. He hurtled down the long corridor leading to the commissioner's office with a speed amazing for one of his bulk. A large, long-nosed man stepped in his path and seized his shoulder with one hand.

"You have to have an appointment to see the commissioner," his high nasal voice shrilled. "You can't—"

The big man had small, close-set eyes and a petulant, fishlike mouth. He was Henry Bolton, deputy commissioner. Henry did not like the deputy part of it. He was quite aware of his own importance and was accustomed to having civilians—particularly unimportant ones—do as he told them.

The fat Oriental surprised him. Wide, staring eyes surveyed Henry for a second. The chunky one's hands clawed frantically at his own throat. Then, gobbling incoherently, he threw both hands outward, shaking Henry off as if he had been a child. Bolton let out a roar of anger and made one more grab. Then he backed away.

"Ouch!" he blurted. "The guy's on fire."

Bolton had seized a part of the Oriental's coat sleeve that was still smoldering. The fugitive paid him no more attention. He plunged through the door marked "Commissioner" and hurled himself toward two figures who were engaged in conversation.

One of the men was speaking in brisk, crackling phrases. He was the younger of the two, a brown-haired, square-jawed man clad in a snappily tailored brown worsted, tan shoes and a colorful foulard tie. This was James Wildcat Gordon, the youthful dynamic and fearsomely unorthodox commisioner of police. Wildcat leaped to aid the Oriental as soon as he saw him. There was terror here.

The Oriental's eyes were glazing. He clawed at this throat, fighting

desperately for breath. Inarticulate sounds gurgled from his lips. Then, with a superhuman effort, he gasped: "N-nolting!" then toppled, like a sack that had suddenly become empty. He folded limply on the floor, writhed once and was still.

The tall, gaunt man who was with Wildcat bent down swiftly. This man was totally bald, except for two gray tufts over his ears, and he appeared to squint. Gnarled fingers felt for pulse and heartbeat. Then he straightened.

"He's dead, Wildcat," Deputy Richard Traeger rumbled in a voice that seemed to come from some subterranean cave. "Must have been badly burned."

Wildcat Gordon was stripping charred clothing from the dead man. His words were low, staccato.

"I don't think so, Quick," he snapped. "I think it was something else. Lean closer and tell me what you smell."

Old Quick Trigger, as the gaunt deputy was affectionately called by his friends, leaned closer. The odor was like that of hot flypaper, the sickly sweetish smell that had come into being when the small, darting figure had stopped the Oriental outside of police headquarters.

"Hellamighty, Wildcat," Quick Trigger rumbled. "That doesn't smell like anything I know of that'll kill a man. What is it?"

Wildcat shrugged. He leaned again over the dead man and started to search his pockets. He found a leather billfold and straightened. He sniffed the atmosphere, a surprised expression on his face.

"Whatever it was, it is gone now," he said.

Quick leaned over again. Wildcat was right. The sweetish smell was gone; it had vanished as completely as if it hadn't been there at all!

Wildcat Gordon, meanwhile, was examining the contents of the billfold. There was a nominal amount of money and a card that bore the words:

HONG CHUNG
Oriental Imports
Doyers Street

Wildcat's blue eyes hardened.

"Hong Chung," he mused. "And John Rourke Nolting."

Quick Trigger swung around abruptly. Even Quick was perfectly familiar with the name of John Rourke Nolting.

"The millionaire chemist?" he blurted. "The guy who's been getting all that publicity in the newspapers? What's he got to do with this?"

He grunted in annoyance and strode swiftly to a small desk in one corner of the room. He came back with a late edition of the morning paper.

"Look at this," he rumbled. "I always thought the guy was a philanthropist. But it looks as if he's just another publicity hound."

He handed Wildcat the paper.

MILLIONAIRE CHEMIST READY TO STARTLE WORLD WITH ORIENTAL MYSTERY

The story stated that John Rourke Nolting, long known as a philanthropist and an ardent friend of China, had admitted he was working on something that might change the course of Oriental history. Questioned further, he had admitted that it might, indeed, considerably alter history elsewhere.

The reporter hadn't been entirely fair in his handling of the story. An experienced newsman would have realized that Nolting had not sought the publicity, but that he had actually tried to minimize the story and

play down the mystery. But the reporter hadn't been interested in an accurate portrayal of Nolting's motives. He wanted a sensational story and got it.

Wildcat Gordon mentioned that fact to Quick Trigger.

"I don't know what it is," he said. "But I have had confidential reports that Nolting is just about to announce the greatest achievement of his career. This man blurted out Nolting's name just before he died. And there has been a Hong Chung working with the chemist."

Quick Trigger started for his hat.

"I suppose we call on Nolting?"

Wildcat nodded.

"We'll phone him first. Perhaps it will be better to have him come here."

Wildcat looked up the number, picked up his private outside phone and dialed. The ringing signal buzzed and buzzed, but no one answered on the other end. Wildcat cradled the instrument.

"Peculiar," he said. "I know Nolting and don't believe he would leave his laboratory without someone in it. Get Slug and we'll start down there."

Wildcat phoned again, on an interoffice instrument. He told the morgue attendant to come up for the body of Hong Chung.

"The body is to remain unidentified until I instruct you otherwise," Wildcat added. "And you are to let no one know that it has come from my office. I think that someone might be extremely interested in that information."

Quick Trigger, who had been on another phone, turned to his chief.

"Can't find Slug," he rumbled.

Slug Minor, christened Horace, was Wildcat Gordon's gargantuan, pugnacious chauffeur and general handy man.

Leave word at the desk for him to meet us," Wildcat rapped. Then: "Let's go."

Quick Trigger called the main desk with Wildcat's message. Wildcat first gave him the address of the Nolting laboratories, which were in the shadow of Brooklyn Bridge. Then the two men raced through the corridor toward the police garage.

Long-nosed Henry Bolton saw the quick departure. By the time Wildcat was behind the wheel of a sleek sedan, Henry was climbing in the back seat with Quick Trigger. Someday, Henry was certain that he would prove sufficiently valuable that the mayor would throw Wildcat out and appoint him as commissioner. He didn't intend to be left out of anything in the meantime that would permit unshared glory to go to Wildcat.

The young commissioner opened up the siren and drove over Canal to Bowery, down Bowery to James Street and then into the tangle that borders the East River water front.

They didn't reach the Nolting laboratories immediately. Their progress was blocked on one of the narrow streets by a confusion of fire apparatus, hose lines and curious passers-by. Smashed against the brick wall of what looked like an empty building, Wildcat saw a small coupé from which smoke and flame still drifted upward. Near the machine was the body of a man.

"That Chinaman was still smoking when he got to headquarters, Wildcat," Quick said suddenly. "I wonder if—"

But Wildcat Gordon was already out of the police sedan. Perhaps he was wondering, too. He strode quickly to the coupé, just as the chemical extinguishers of the fire-

men put out the last of the blaze. He looked at the unrecognizable form on the street.

"Anyone know who he is?" Wildcat asked.

A patrolman in uniform stepped quickly up. He carried a leather brief case in one hand.

"Apparently, it is John Rourke Nolting, sir," he said. "This has his name inside."

"Laboratory men been here?" Wildcat asked.

The patrolman nodded.

"They made a dental chart of the corpse and are checking up on Nolting. He may have had a chart made for insurance."

Wildcat nodded curtly.

"Good work. Anything else peculiar about it?"

The harness bull began to show the excitement he apparently felt. He had moved pretty fast in this; and if something really did come of it, he might be on his way out of uniform and onto the plain-clothes squad.

"You bet there is," he blurted. "Some big car shoved this coupé into the curb. No one got the license number, but I found two witnesses who say it was done deliberately. Then there was a Chinese who ran away from the thing just after the fire was set."

"The fire was set?" Wildcat asked.

"Yeah," the cop insisted. "Someone in the second car threw some stuff on the coupé, then lit a match, according to the two witnesses."

Wildcat Gordon grunted. He turned on his heel and strode back to the police sedan. Quick Trigger and Bolton climbed into the car with him, and Wildcat drove the remaining two short blocks to the Nolting Experimental & Chemical Laboratories. The place was a one-story wooden building at the river's edge.

Inside, they found the men from the police laboratory. The detectives had found one occupant of the place. He was an old watchman by the name of Johnson, who had been with Nolting for more than a quarter of a century. He had been found on the floor, slugged, bound and gagged.

"It happened right after Mr. Nolting left with Hong Chung," he told Wildcat. "I didn't even see the men who did it."

An inner door opened then, and a huge barrel of a man with a jaw suggestive of an English bulldog came into the room. This was Slug Minor, Wildcat's chauffeur.

"Came down another block to meet you," he growled in a loud, booming voice. "I missed the fire and got here ahead of you. The lab boys told me what had happened, so we've been prowling around in Nolting's personal papers. We came up with these."

Slug held out a hand that resembled a tough, bony boxing glove with fingers. In it, he held a sheaf of insurance policies. In handing them to Wildcat, he trod on one of Henry Bolton's feet. Henry didn't say anything out loud. He couldn't *swear* that Slug had done it on purpose. And these boxing mitts of fists of Slug's were not padded enough for Henry to want him to feel them against his jaw.

Wildcat Gordon nodded briefly. He took the insurance policies, checked them, then looked at the chart and measurements from the corpse beside the burning coupé.

"Did you find anything here to indicate what is behind it?"

Henry Bolton snorted.

"What could *he* find?"

Slug glowered at him.

"Nothing that I'm going to tell while you're standing around, you claim-jumping termite," he growled.

"I'm off duty now, and I'm going home."

Wildcat had to calm him down somewhat. Slug lapsed into insults of jaw-breaking length which Henry would have to look up before he would know what they were. Slug studied the dictionary just to learn names to annoy Henry.

At the moment, he handed Wildcat a folded letter. It was on excellently engraved stationery, bearing the letterhead, "Charles Lee Lautoy." Charles Lautoy, unofficial mayor of Chinatown, was the head of one of the most powerful tongs in the country. The missive stated:

Dear Friend Nolting:

What you are doing for my country, no nation could repay. With the deepest gratitude, I must thank you and with equal humility I must warn you that if it becomes known you will surely be destroyed along with your work. I beg that you let the sons of Han aid and protect you.

"I found it stuck in a crack between his desk and the wall," Slug explained. "The rest of the desk had been cleaned out. Somebody—"

There was a dull crash behind a narrow door in the office wall. Bolton leaped toward the door. But he hesitated. Henry was not only a claim jumper, as Slug Minor had suggested, but he was quite willing to let Slug reach a point of combat a bit in the lead. One hamlike fist of the burly chauffeur closed on the doorknob and whipped it open. It proved to be a utility closet. A slender figure tumbled out onto the floor in a tangle of mop handles and cleaning equipment.

Henry Bolton howled in glee and pounced on it. Holding the man proved a little more difficult; but presently Bolton stood up, his fingers tightly gripping the collar of a wiry Chinese youth who shrilled first in frightened Cantonese and then spoke in English.

"I have done nothing wrong," he insisted. "I am Johnny Sing Wong, a friend of Mr. Nolting."

Wildcat Gordon stepped close to him, reached into a pocket that was stuffed with papers. All of them proved to be personal correspondence of the millionaire chemist.

"Nolting has apparently been murdered," he snapped.

Johnny Sing Wong's lips twitched oddly. His voice was shrill and frightened.

"I . . . I know— That is why—"

His black eyes searched the faces of his captors. He compressed his lips tightly for a moment. Then he seemed to wilt.

"I have nothing to say," he whispered.

Wildcat Gordon's face showed no emotion. His words crackled sharply.

"You are engaged to marry Ming Lautoy, the daughter of your tong chief," he observed. "Hong Chung, Nolting's friend was also a suitor."

Color drained from the face of the young Chinese.

"You know that? You think—"

"I want to know what it was that John Rourke Nolting was perfecting," Wildcat snapped. "And I want to know it now."

Johnny Sing Wong looked evasive.

"I . . . I don't know," he mumbled.

Wildcat grunted. Then he brought amazed protests from all three of his aids. Probably for the first time in their lives, Quick Trigger, Slug Minor and Bolton agreed.

"Turn him loose," Wildcat ordered. "We won't get anything out of him now." He escorted Johnny Sing Wong to the door and stood there for a moment. "Search the place for fingerprints and any other evidence you can find," he instructed. "I will meet you at headquarters."

Wildcat went out into the street. He knew the Oriental mind; knew that the frail-appearing young man would withstand the torture of hot irons if he were taken in now. Besides, Wildcat had other plans. He was convinced that this thing had only begun. Nolting might be dead, but what he represented was certain to bring more violence and death. That letter from Charles Lee Lautoy convinced him of that.

He stopped at the police sedan only long enough to extract a compact black bundle from a compartment under the front seat. Then he started on foot in the direction of Chatham Square, a scant half dozen blocks away.

Wildcat had decided that this problem needed more than mere police work. An almost legendary individual—a black-clad, husky-voiced enemy of the underworld who was as ruthless as any crook—who would have to cope with the underworld in order to learn what secret of John Rourke Nolting's warranted murder. Wildcat would call in The Whisperer. He knew the feared Nemesis of crime, for The Whisperer was a secret disguise of Wildcat himself.

But before he assumed that identity, before he reached Chatham Square on the edge of Chinatown, he made another stop.

THE WHISPERER

● A low, mirthless chuckle, an awesome whisper of defiance, as a half-visible wraith moves through the night. Criminals flee at this eerie challenge, for it announces the arrival of the mysterious nemesis of crime, for whom there are no rules or regulations deterrent in the path of justice—The Whisperer.

CHAPTER II.

BROTHERHOOD OF MAN.

The sign beside the door was a simple brass plate. It read:

TAGOYA MATSIMO
Importer of Oriental Art
Tea Silks Spices

Wildcat Gordon climbed a set of worn, rubber-carpeted stairs to the second floor. Cooking odors drifted down from tenement apartments on the floors above. Wildcat pushed through a shabby door which bore a replica of the brass plate beside the street entrance. Instantly, he was in another world.

Delicate incense beat back the smells of soup and cabbage. The walls of a big room were hung with expensive silks and tapestries. The rugs were ankle-deep and of rare design and texture. Clerks and typists

sat behind a dozen or so desks. They were all Orientals. But there was something about them that was peculiar. Wildcat Gordon's knowledge of resident Orientals would have caused him to notice it, even if he had not been thoroughly familiar with this particular place.

Sharp-eyed, brusque men worked pleasantly beside others who were more placid, more leisurely in their actions. Soft, lilting singsong Chinese mingled with the more strident sibilance of the quick-eyed men. Mixed groups whose ancestors, whose actual relatives were at grips in the battlefields of China, worked here in friendly co-operation. It was, as far as Wildcat knew, the only place in New York where such a unique situation could be found.

Before any of the clerks could come to aid Wildcat Gordon, a short, thick-torsoed man rose from behind an inlaid teakwood desk that stood on a raised platform at one end of the room. The military cut of his black, bristly hair made the top of his head look oddly square. Alert eyes twinkled merrily from behind glasses that Wildcat knew were rimmed with genuine tortoise shell from the southern seas. His voice was a precise sibilance of syllables.

"Iss exceptional pleasure to see you, commissioner."

The stocky man bowed formally in Oriental style. Then he thrust out one hand to grasp Wildcat's.

"Your excellency seems perturbed," he said tentatively.

"John Rourke Nolting has been murdered," Wildcat said bluntly. "I suspect your people had a hand in it."

Tagoya Matsimo looked grieved. He shook his head unhappily.

"It iss not a surprise," he said. "Come inside and tell me about it."

He led the way into an inner chamber that was furnished in expensive simplicity. Wildcat Gordon told him what had happened. Matsimo sighed and spread his hands in a gesture of despair.

"There iss famine in China," he said. "Our peoples are at war. We Nipponese who hate war are in the minority, and we are not respected. The way of the peaceful Japanese iss difficult. What little we do here to work for peace iss of no avail."

He was silent for a moment. Wildcat stared at the wall. He knew that what the importer had said was true. Tagoya Matsimo was well known for the antiwar work he had done, for his attempts to bring together in peaceful co-operation his people and the Chinese. He had been publicly scorned by his own countrymen, at least by those of them who did not believe in the way of peace.

Matsimo leaned forward suddenly and tapped Wildcat on one knee.

"I will tell you all I know," he said. "What Nolting was developing might have meant victory for China. That much I have heard, though I do not know what it was. I have heard only that it was a development which could have been of no use to my country and which must therefore be destroyed, rather than stolen."

Wildcat Gordon stood up. He bid good-by and strode out through the room full of clerks and typists. He was not sure that he had learned anything here. But if what Matsimo had said was true, if the Nolting discovery was something only of value to China and if it had been destroyed, there should be no reason for further violence.

But if Matsimo was not correct, Chinatown might readily burst into flame.

Wildcat paused at a dim turn of the unfurnished hall and listened. Swiftly, then, he opened the black bundle that he carried, pulled black clothing from it. The somber garb quickly covered his snappy brown worsted, black spats went over his tan shoes. A black powder went into his crinkly brown hair, leaving it smooth and black. Tiny sutures of invisible tape gave an Oriental slant to his eyes, and green contact lenses changed their color. Then, with sure, deft fingers, he inserted into his jaw an odd pair of dental plates.

The jaw was suddenly long and pointed. The entire contour of his face was changed. And into the dimness of the hallway, an eerie whispering challenge rose, a chill warning to criminals who might cross the path of The Whisperer!

Chuckling softly, the transformed police commissioner stepped out into the street, no longer being held in check by the restraint of rules and policies. The Whisperer was a free agent who dealt swift justice to the underworld, unhampered.

Softly, the long arm of justice padded toward Chatham Square and Chinatown. His eyes were ahead and his mind was on Oriental faces that he expected to find. His concentration, perhaps, contributed to the fact that he did not realize he was being followed.

The man who was trailing him had been standing opposite the establishment of Tagoya Matsimo for quite a while. Wildcat Gordon hadn't seen him when he went in, because the man had been gazing into a shop window. He wasn't an Oriental. He was a tall, straight-backed white man with the bearing of an army officer. He had blond hair and a short blond mustache.

He sauntered along on the opposite side of the street, apparently not interested in The Whisperer at all.

More time had elapsed since the finding of the corpse in the wrecked, burning coupé than The Whisperer had realized. Shadows from grimy buildings already cast gloom in the yawning pits that were the streets of Chinatown. The Whisperer did not, however, hurry. Chinatown was well known to him, and he to it.

Wildcat Gordon had not been foolish in turning loose Johnny Sing Wong, the betrothed of Ming Lautoy, daughter of the mighty tong chief. For, where the police would have been helpless in the dens and alleys of Chinatown, The Whisperer was not.

Charles Lautoy owed a debt to The Whisperer. He owed the life of an innocent countryman who would have been wrongly framed into Sing Sing's electric chair. That same countryman was second in command of the Golden Tree Tong. He was absent, now, in San Francisco on some official business. But The Whisperer could be sure that Charles Lautoy would honor the debt.

And in honoring it, the Chinese would be again saving the lives of his people.

The Whisperer turned into Doyers Street from Chatham Square, past the Bloody Angle of that notorious thoroughfare where so many tong men have been slain in the slaughterous warfare of the Orientals. Beyond that, around the corner on Pell Street, the long arm of justice expected to speak before a door that would be opened to him and bring about a meeting with Charles Lee Lautoy.

There, unless the youth were guilty of double-crossing his countrymen, Johnny Sing Wong would

talk freely, as he would not have talked in a police cell.

Such was The Whisperer's plan. But there was one hazard that he must always take. Other persons and forces were aware that their one most dangerous enemy was the black-clad foe of crime. It was only natural that whoever was really behind this plot would be watchful of The Whisperer's movements. It was not difficult for them to suspect that the murders of Hong Chung and John Rourke Nolting would bring the mysterious investigator to the tong of the Golden Tree.

Near the corner of Pell Street was a disreputable tenement with an open areaway leading to an evil-smelling courtyard. The Whisperer instinctively tensed as he approached. Here, if at all, the enemy should strike. For The Whisperer knew that, from that courtyard in the rear, a dozen hidden passageways led to pits of vice about which the police officially knew nothing.

Compact hands strayed to concealed shoulder holsters as the stocky foeman of the underworld approached that opening in the tenement's wall. A low hiss of challenge escaped from his lips as dim figures scuttled into a semicircle in the late afternoon shadows. The Whisperer was ready; ready to trade lead with the underworld.

A sharp voice rapped out in command.

"Please to halt. Or we shall kill you!"

The Whisperer did not halt. He sprang quickly forward. A shot blasted out and a bullet whistled through the air, striking with a *splaat* against a brick wall! It was a mutilating soft-nosed leaden slug. But The Whisperer was not there when it landed.

With an eerie cry of defiance, he sprang into the air and twisted. One hand gripped the trailing end of a fire-escape ladder. It was hooked above him and did not give under his weight. The Whisperer had one of his twin death-dealing guns out. Lurid blue flame lanced through the gloom. The only sound was a hiss as of highly compressed air released through a small tube. The Whisperer's supersilenced pistols were well known to the underworld. His aim was also well known. Scurrying shadows flattened into corners.

Voices gabbled then. They were not the lilting, singsong tones of the Chinese. These voices were harshly sibilant, similar to the voice of Tagoya Matsimo, though The Whisperer knew that Matsimo's was not one of them.

Another shot rang through the air. The Whisperer dropped, a dim huddle on the sidewalk. Dark red fluid spread out under his body! A sharp cry of triumph shrilled up from the men. They suddenly lost their fear and crowded forward like carrion birds surging over a prey that can no longer fight back. Swiftly, they scooped up the huddled form, exhibiting a teamwork that showed careful planning. No motion was wasted.

They chattered in their strange, shrill tongue. The Whisperer's head moved, indicating that he was not unconscious. The little men, who proved to be slant-eyed and yellow-skinned, kept up their conversation. It apparently did not occur to them that a white man could understand. Certainly, it did not occur that The Whisperer was really Wildcat Gordon and that the young police commissioner had made a study of two Oriental tongues, so that he would be able to cope with national crises that he had for years been certain would one day arise.

The Whisperer sprang into the air and twisted, one hand gripping the fire-escape ladder, the other firing one of his supersilenced pistols.

The yellow men ran with their burden. Their immediate goal was a dark and dingy cellar under one of the ancient buildings that still stands in Chinatown. One of them found a single naked electric bulb and switched it on. Another turned The Whisperer over and laughed shrilly, pointing to the sticky red smear on the black-garbed chest. Another bound his limp wrists.

It should have occurred to the yellow men to be more careful. The eel-like quality of the supple wrists was unbelievably deceptive. The Whisperer rolled, moaning faintly, as the knots were tied. That resulted in looser knots than had been intended.

The men kept on talking in harsh Japanese. Some were looking out a small door to be sure no pursuit had come. But one thing was obvious from their conversation, and it caused The Whisperer to conclude that there was no purpose in remaining longer.

When he had realized the nationality of his assailants, he had dropped to the ground, unhurt. The shot that apparently had struck him had missed its mark. But long ago he had come to realize how careless criminals are of a foe who seems already vanquished. He carried at all times a small vial of stuff that looked and smelled like human blood. He had broken that against his chest when he dropped.

The Whisperer had hoped to learn who these men were and who was behind them. He knew who they were now, by nationality. But their own whispered words to each other showed that they did not themselves know who was their leader.

With a low, chuckling whisper of defiance, the black-clad man slipped his bonds, rolled quickly to his feet and broke into a crouching run. The element of surprise undoubtedly aided him greatly. Before his foes could move to halt him, he whipped out a second supersilenced pistol and scooped up from the cellar floor the one which his captors had taken from him. Doubly armed, he backed to an exit door.

Excited cries came from these men. The Whisperer recalled news stories of self-propelled, man-controlled suicide torpedo boats, once put into service by the sons of Nippon. And now some of these assailants proved that they were working not for cash alone, but for the Rising Sun. They lunged into the muzzles of The Whisperer's guns!

The guns hissed in deadly menace. As well as he could, The Whisperer shot for points that would not be fatal. He could even now hear police sirens in the distance. Let the police find these wounded men. Later, perhaps they could be of some use. Dead, they could not be. With a final hiss of warning, The Whisperer vanished down a dark passageway.

But the result was not quite as he had anticipated. The yells of his assailants were not despairing tones of defeat. There was an odd note of triumph in them. And soon, The Whisperer found out why that was so. The corridor did not lead to another street as he had anticipated. It led, instead, into a great lightless room that was an immense pit of imprisonment. He knew it was underground by the faint sound of dripping water—seepage, no doubt, from some leaky main or sewer.

Other sounds came to his ears then, faint but distinct. There were moaning sirens and the staccato sounds of shots. The Whisperer recognized the sharp report of police .38s. The police were temporarily, at least, keeping the gunmen busy.

There was a muffled clang of a metal door. Then silence, broken only by that slow drip of water in the pitch blackness.

There was another muffled noise then, the sound of a leather heel scraping furtively against the wet concrete floor. Instantly, The Whisperer was alert. One hand crept to a pencil flash that he carried. He crouched, pistol in one hand, flashlight in the other. Then he flicked it on.

There was a startled cry, and he saw before him a skinny, cringing figure. The man was difficult to accurately describe in the pale beam of the flash. He was cheaply clad, black-haired and black-eyed. His mouth was weak and pleading. He looked like an Eurasian, a half-caste of some Oriental breed.

"Do not shoot, mister," his quavering voice implored. "I am a prisoner here. If you are also, I can show you how we can both escape."

The Whisperer's chilling voice spoke in the dank, tomblike cellar.

"If that is so, why have you not already gone?"

The man cringed more abjectly. The fear in his eyes was the fear of an animal.

"I cannot reach it, mister. Together, we may be able to manage it. But, I beg of you, do not take it yourself and leave me. It is a section of an old storm sewer above us."

The Whisperer flashed his light up on the dripping masonry wall. There was a black opening there. Jagged bricks of a bygone year were crumbling like powder. But it might be a means of escape.

"Brace yourself at the wall," the crime foe whispered. "I will mount and pull you up after me."

The skinny Eurasian shuddered, but he did as he was told. The Whisperer leaped quickly to his shoulders, hauled himself up to the black edge of the hole. Then he lay prone, reached down and grasped the extended fingers of his fellow prisoner. He pulled him up, flicked off the light and sat for a moment in the darkness.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "And what are you doing here?"

The quavering voice seemed to have lost some of its fear.

"I am Nuto Klee, a half-caste," he confided. "These men are of a nationality that claims half of my blood. But it is the other half of me that guides my emotions and my mind. They fear I have learned too much."

The Whisperer rose to his feet and flicked on the pencil flash once more. He turned his back to the cellar prison and picked his way carefully through rubble and debris that littered the ancient storm sewer. Great rats scurried back and forth, glaring with hot, red eyes.

"Have you learned too much?"

Nuto Klee's voice became cautious. It developed an oily note.

"Perhaps, mister. Perhaps it would depend upon who asked me about it. Are you not the one known as The Whisperer?"

An eerie chuckle was his only answer. It was obvious that the question was purely a matter of speech. Nuto Klee had recognized The Whisperer. But the chuckle made him shudder anew.

"Perhaps what this poor one knows it not really as valuable as I thought," he offered. "Perhaps you would give Nuto Klee only death instead of the reward he thought he should receive."

The Whisperer was hurrying, now. He wanted to do many things before the police spread throughout Chinatown. He had no time in this slimy,

JAMES "WILDCAT" GORDON

● Wildcat Gordon, New York's youngest police commissioner, is known for his hard-hitting, unorthodox methods for solving crime. As The Whisperer, there are no rules, no interfering politicians to decree how a case is to be solved and slow the swift path of justice.

rat-infested sewer to question Nuto Klee at length.

Suddenly, the old sewer ended against a plaster wall. The Whisperer struck it with the butt of one gun. The plaster fell and they found themselves in another cellar. Through a window, The Whisperer saw the neon sign of a Chinese eating house that was familiar to him. He chuckled softly, then twisted behind the cringing Nuto Klee.

"Perhaps," he husked, "Nuto Klee will be paid as he deserves. We will go immediately to the cavern of the Golden Tree Tong."

Nuto Klee squealed in protest. But the Whisperer prodded him out of the cellar and along the dimness of Pell Street. They had not many steps to go.

A dingy apartment hallway swallowed them. Half a dozen brass mailboxes lined one wall. The slot of one of them, The Whisperer knew, held a concealed microphone. He leaned close to it and chanted several words in a musical singsong dialect.

There was silence for a moment. Then the section of floor on which they stood began to rotate. Nuto Klee shivered as if he were in the grip of a bitter chill. A segment of wall swung. A duplicate set of brass mailboxes replaced the one against which they leaned. Then, on the other side of the wall, they faced the leader of the Golden Tree Tong.

CHAPTER III.

MATSIMO LEARNS SOMETHING.

The room in which they found themselves far surpassed the richness of Tagoya Matsimo's importing establishment in splendor. Some of the most beautiful art that China has to offer was represented there. Tall Ming vases had, as background, golden tapestries that were completely breath-taking. Carved tables of teakwood, inlaid with ivory and jade, were everywhere.

Ornamental dragons of jade with precious jewels for eyes and teeth stood in mystic guard. And in the center was the Golden Tree, a dazzling thing of hammered gold with leaves of rubies, sapphires and emeralds. The room was both beautiful and majestic.

But no more so than the two persons who dominated it. And they were as different from each other as the dragons were from the graceful

vases of the Ming dynasty.

Charles Lee Lautoy stood as menacingly majestic as the dragons themselves. Clad in a mandarin robe, he towered above the half dozen other Chinese in the room. He was tall, a Manchu from the North. He spoke now in a Cantonese dialect, though it was an adopted tongue not truly his own. He bowed, dark eyes flashing above high cheekbones and the prominent, straight nose of the mandarin.

"The lotus bud and your servant welcome in the name of our countrymen, one who whispers."

The Whisperer bowed in greeting. Once to the stately head of the tong, and then to his daughter. Slender as a willow, her skin like the gold of the sacred tree itself, Ming Lautoy was enough to take the breath of any man. Her face was just pleasantly round and her eyes large, luminous in quality. Her voice was mellow.

"Welcome, one who whispers," she said simply. "We are indeed in unhappy circumstances."

Behind her, hands bound, his head lowered in misery, was the thin young man Wildcat Gordon had let go against the protests of Bolton, Quick Trigger and Slug Minor. Johnny Sing Wong raised his black eyes only to look sorrowfully at the girl. He seemed concerned only with her opinion of him, not of the fate that perhaps lay in store for him. Charley Lautoy continued speaking.

"Word has been whispered to us that our young countryman has done us tremendous harm," he said. "We are endeavoring to learn the truth."

The Whisperer shoved Nuto Klee before him.

"This one can perhaps tell us," he husked. "He seems to know more than a casual amount."

The tall Manchu's eyes hardened. "Had he not been your guest, he would not have been admitted," he said. "Nuto Klee is a renegade."

Nuto Klee moaned softly. His fear of Charley Lautoy was manifest. He dropped suddenly to his knees.

"Honest, I know nothing," he protested. "I was talking importantly to impress this one."

Charley Lautoy was about to reply when he was interrupted by a pounding at a door behind him. A bellowing voice demanded entrance. The Whisperer recognized it as that of old Quick Trigger.

"Open up in there," Quick demanded. "Open the door or I'll have to break it down."

The whining nasal of Henry Bolton could be heard urging him to do that anyway. Charley Lautoy looked quickly at The Whisperer, alarm in his face.

"Richard Traeger is my friend," he said. "But the other—"

The Whisperer nodded; he glanced toward one of the huge glowering dragons and moved quickly. One fist chopped down on Nuto Klee. The half-caste fell sprawling. He wasn't injured, but he was confused for a moment and could not see what was happening. The Whisperer leaped to the big dragon, pressed a button, and the thing opened like a clam shell. He leaped inside, and Charley Lautoy swung it quickly shut. Then Lautoy opened the door.

Quick Trigger was the first one in. He stammered an apology; said there had been a lot of shooting that had to be explained. Slug Minor lumbered in behind him, saying nothing. Henry Bolton, the third one in, was the first to recognize the bound form of Johnny Sing Wong. Henry's small eyes popped. From his vantage point within the hollow dragon, The Whisperer could see it all.

"I guess *we* were right in letting

that guy go," he muttered. "We get the whole bunch of them this way."

Slug Minor snorted in disgust.

"*We* were right!" he exploded. "A masterpiece of tergiversating opportunism, even for a natural ingrate like you, Henry."

Bolton groaned.

"I wish you'd lose that dictionary, you tree-climbing ape."

"You change your mind at the least opportunity, Henry," Slug translated. "But what I want to know is, who is *this* mug."

He pointed to Nuto Klee, who was then struggling to his feet. Charley Lautoy spoke quickly.

"He was brought here by a friend," he said. "I do not know what he might have to offer."

Nuto Klee looked furtively around. His eyes blinked in mild surprise. But he held his tongue. Apparently, he realized that it would only get him in deeper trouble to claim that he came here with The Whisperer. For the black-clad crime foe was very much on the police wanted list. Klee merely mumbled incoherently.

Quick Trigger cleared his throat and peered at Lautoy with the semblance of nearsightedness. That effect had fooled many people. Quick saw a lot of things that were deeper than ordinary vision could uncover.

"I'm sorry to do it," he said. "But I'll have to ask all of you to come over to Centre Street to answer some questions. Maybe we can get some basis on which to work."

The Whisperer overheard the conversation. He was watching the scene from narrow slits under the green jade eyes of the dragon. As the party prepared to leave the tong headquarters, he stooped down, pulled a cord and slid back a trapdoor. Then he slid down an inclined tube that ended in an adjoining cellar.

The Whisperer was probably the only white man who knew of the secret escape from the headquarters of the Golden Tree Tong.

The cellar in which The Whisperer found himself gave onto a small entryway near the junction of Pell and Doyers Street. He hurried out of that and cut back into Doyers Street, retracing the steps that had brought him into Chinatown. He collided roughly with a stocky, crouching figure at the corner. It was Tagoya Matsimo.

The importer whirled in alarm. The alarm turned to terror at recognition. Then Matsimo got control of himself. Perhaps he remembered things he had heard of The Whisperer.

"You . . . you are friend of the Chinese," he stammered.

Matsimo was Japanese. But his efforts to bring peace between his people and the Chinese were known to all. He didn't wait for an answer. His utterance was more a statement than a question. He pointed down Doyers Street toward the Bloody Angle. Small, yellow men huddled there. But it was not toward them that Matsimo pointed. It was at another figure across the street.

"Who iss he?" Matsimo hissed. "He spies on something."

The Whisperer strained his eyes in the gloom; saw the tall, military figure of the white man with blond hair and blond mustache. Although he had no way of knowing it, this was the same man who had trailed him from the doorway of Matsimo's importing concern.

A police whistle shrilled as they watched, and uniformed figures began moving up the street. Matsimo

cast a worried eye at The Whisperer.

"You must not be apprehended," he said. "I have my apartment on Chatham Square. Come."

Swiftly and silently, the two men raced along Pell Street to the Bowery and down to Chatham Square. Presently they were in Matsimo's apartment, which was above a pawnshop. Matsimo was excited.

"I have information I must give to Wildcat Gordon," he said. "You are not friendly with the police, but I believe you work for justice. So I will tell you first."

He paused and looked around as if he feared the walls of his own apartment had ears. Then he leaned close to The Whisperer.

"John Nolting, who iss dead, had developed something that would bring great strength to the Chinese people. It would make them perhaps so strong that my people could not attack them. It would be a great thing for peace. I do not know what it is. But this much I have heard."

A low, chuckling whisper came from Matsimo's guest. This, at least, was more than Matsimo had apparently known when Wildcat Gordon had called on him. The Whisperer's greenish eyes glowed faintly.

"Who would know what it is?" he husked.

Matsimo leaned even closer; he dropped his voice so that the man beside him could scarcely hear.

"Hong Chung, his assistant," he confided. "Find Hong Chung. He was entirely trusted by John Nolting, and he forgets nothing!"

The Whisperer stiffened. He recalled the orders Wildcat Gordon had given that no one should be told of Hong Chung's death in police headquarters. And he did not believe those orders had been violated. There was no way, therefore, that Tagoya Matsimo could know that that Chinese was dead. And if Hong Chung *had* been alive, Matsimo's information would have been of real value.

The Whisperer remembered other things that he had encountered during that hectic day. He remembered his fellow prisoner in the slimy prison of darkness. His voice suddenly sharpened.

"What has Nuto Klee to do with this," he snapped. "I am informed that he is in this thing up to his half-caste neck."

Tagoya Matsimo's face was as inscrutable as a block of carved topaz. His eyes were steady behind his tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses. Then they flickered with contempt. He snapped his well-manicured fingers.

"Pah! Nuto Klee is to wipe feet upon. Up to his neck would be no distance at all. Who would trust him?"

Tagoya Matsimo had answered one question with another. The Whisperer rose, bowed his thanks and took leave of the importer's apartment.

It was dark when he reached the street. Street lights glimmered futilely. The Whisperer hailed a taxicab; he kept his face hidden from the driver as he climbed into it.

He pondered as he rode toward Centre Street. He did not yet know what he had. On the one hand, there was Nuto Klee, a furtive, usually spineless half-caste who hinted of important things that he knew. Petty hirelings of the underworld frequently do that to curry favor, even when they have nothing to offer. Sometimes they do it for the mere feeling of importance that it gives them. This time, The Whisperer did not know.

In addition to Nuto Klee, he had

a mysterious white man whom he had never seen before. And then he had Tagoya Matsimo. The importer could have spent years building up a reputation that he really did not deserve. But why was he going out of his way to be so friendly? Even if Matsimo knew that Hong Chung was dead, a secret that had died with Chung would be of no further value to anyone. John Rourke Nolting and his secret should be of no further interest to the killer.

The Whisperer paid off his cab near Centre Street and dodged along in the shadows. He felt sure that there was still something here that had not come into the open—something that was still an active part of crime's plan. He heard a growl of surprise from the taxi driver, then, and the name of The Whisperer. He had been recognized. But before the driver could profit by it, crime's foe blended into the shadows.

CHAPTER IV.

EAST MEETS WEST.

The Whisperer did not, of course, go to police headquarters. The department would probably have declared a holiday on his capture. Henry Bolton had felt for years that if he could capture The Whisperer, he would probably be able to supplant Wildcat Gordon as commissoner. He would have had a stroke if he had realized how right he was —and why.

The Whisperer padded silently to a modest building across the street from headquarters. He went up a flight of stairs and unlocked a door that bore no marking or other designation. This compact room held a two-way short-wave radio and an automatic recording device that answered the telephone and received messages.

Certain persons had the number of that phone. But it was unlisted, and only one man alive knew the address. That man also knew the identity of The Whisperer. Quick Trigger was that person. He had created the odd dental plates that gave The Whisperer his long, pointed chin and eerie voice.

Quick had been a friend of Wildcat's father when the senior Gordon was himself commissioner of police. Politics and red tape had always irritated Wildcat's father. He had told the young Gordon that they were the handicap of a policeman's efficiency.

When Wildcat had become commissioner, he created The Whisperer to remove that handicap. Neither politics nor red tape deterred the whispering Nemesis of crime. Wildcat had recalled Quick Trigger from a retirement that had proved an irksome bore to the old war horse.

The crime foe moved swiftly, now. He removed the garments of The Whisperer and wrapped them into an inconspicuous bundle which he could leave at headquarters. The dental plates came out, the greenish contact lenses were slipped into a tiny case, and he removed the invisible sutures that gave his eyes an Oriental slant. Brown hair again crinkly without the black, straightening powder, Wildcat Gordon stepped briskly from the room. The color of his raiment, his swift, purposeful stride and the staccato tones of his voice were the direct antithesis of The Whisperer.

He went directly across the street to headquarters and found quite a crowd in his office. Charley Lautoy and the beautiful Ming were there. Johnny Sing Wong looked more dejected than ever. Nuto Klee looked somehow sneeringly triumphant.

Henry Bolton towered over the slim Chinese girl. His manner, as usual, was overbearing.

"It was obvious that the man knew you," he whined nasally. "Who is he?"

Ming Lautoy looked at Johnny Sing Wong. She looked as miserable as Johnny had in the tong headquarters.

"His name would mean nothing to you," she said in her rich, clear voice.

Nuto Klee puffed himself up, apparently having suddenly become of some importance in his own mind.

"You were talking to him today," he sneered. "Very chummy, too, I might say."

Ming Lautoy flinched. Johnny Sing Wong began to curse in Cantonese. No one noticed Wildcat for a moment.

"To whom was she talking?" he asked quietly. What are you talking about?"

Slug Minor growled at Bolton.

"Henry thinks he's a dictator," he said. "A white man who seemed to know Miss Lautoy tried to talk to her as we were leaving Pell Street. Henry wanted to arrest him, but he got away. That's all we know about him."

Wildcat's eyes narrowed.

"What did he look like?"

"Tall fellow," Slug told him. "Very straight. Blond hair and mustache."

Wildcat's face was a mask as he turned to the girl.

"Are you sure you don't want to tell us who he was?"

The girl's eyes didn't waver. She simply shook her head. Wildcat moved across the room and paused to speak in a low tone to Slug Minor. Then he turned to Bolton.

"Can you think of any more questions that are really pertinent, Henry?"

Bolton ran one finger around inside his collar. Wildcat Gordon had a way of making him uncomfortable that he could not seem to shake.

"Well, I . . . I guess not."

"Let each of them sign an official statement," Wildcat instructed. "Then let them go home. I have other things to do."

Henry grumbled while Wildcat went into an inner office.

Slug Minor went out, and Quick Trigger followed Wildcat. The young commissioner sat down at his desk; he called the lieutenant in charge of the missing persons bureau and read a list of measurements and dental work from an elaborate chart on his desk. Then he hung up.

"Shouldn't take long, Quick," he said. "It's just a hunch. But it may get us somewhere."

Quick Trigger's brow was wrinkled in frown.

Presently, Wildcat's phone rang and he picked up the receiver. With his free hand, he wrote rapidly. The figures he put down were Bertillion measurements. Then he rapidly checked the dental chart. His blue eyes were smoldering when he hung up the phone, his voice a crackling snap.

"It checks in every detail," he said. "These are the detailed dental and physical markings of John Rourke Nolting. But they are also the markings of a missing man who was last seen on the Bowery!"

Quick Trigger gasped.

"You mean—"

"A bum who was close to identical was substituted for John Rourke Nolting in that burning coupé," Wildcat snapped. "And Nolting is probably still alive!"

If Nolting were alive, his secret might well live with him. Wildcat Gordon knew that, and he believed

that he now saw the real reason for a spreading web of murder and violence. But who could be concealing Nolting, he could not be sure. He believed Tagoya Matsimo's story that what Nolting had discovered was a tremendous thing of peace, an instrument that could benefit only the Chinese. John Rourke Nolting would not have developed a thing of war, a thing to kill.

So who was hiding the bearer of a great instrument of peace? The enemies of China would be happier and safer with Nolting dead. And the Chinese themselves would have no reason to hide him! No one, it seemed, could gain by this intrigue.

These thoughts brought a low growl from Wildcat's lips. He stood up, paced back and forth across the room.

"It's a mess," he observed. Then he looked at his watch. "Slug Minor should call soon," he finished.

The phone rang almost as he spoke. It was Slug.

"I lost the yellow guy, Wildcat," he said. "But I picked up the white man again. The one with the blond mustache. He's prowling around the water front near the Nolting laboratories."

Wildcat's orders were terse.

"Keep him in sight. If he stops anywhere, phone Quick Trigger. I'm going out."

Wildcat hung up. He looked at old Quick.

"This is a job for The Whisperer," he snapped. "I'm going to pick up this white man and find out who he is."

Quick Trigger looked anxious. He often regretted having manufactured those odd dental plates. He was certain that, sometime, the role of The Whisperer would bring disaster to Wildcat Gordon.

"Be careful, Wildcat?" he warned. "This thing is vicious."

Wildcat Gordon nodded. He picked up the bundle of black clothing and left the office.

The young commissioner strode around the corner toward a dim entrance to the building in which The Whisperer had his Centre Street sanctum. He noticed a parked taxicab at the curb not far from the door. There was nothing unusual in that and no cause for undue curiosity. The driver's nose was buried in an early edition of a morning tabloid, and Wildcat did not see that he was the same cabby who had brought The Whisperer from Chatham Square and who had recognized him!

In his sanctum, The Whisperer drew on the black clothing that transformed Wildcat into the long arm of justice. He fared forth then and found his light, black coupé that was parked nearby. As he slid in behind the wheel, he heard an odd whistle from down the street.

The Whisperer tooled his car down Centre Street to Canal, turned west there and started across town.

Half a block behind him, riding without lights, a taxicab followed. Curtains were drawn down over the windows of the passenger compartment.

Neath the Hudson River, The Whisperer turned into a dark and narrow side street. As he did, the taxi spurted ahead, as if to pass him. With a sudden twist of his wheel, the driver smashed his heavy cab into the side of The Whisperer's coupé! The light car shuddered under the impact and careened out of control into a fire hydrant. But The Whisperer was out of the far side before the coupé had even stopped. Twin tools of death—the super-

silenced pistols—hissed blue flame into the night.

The Whisperer was ready to cope with unexpected odds. Glass shattered in the taxicab as his bullets took effect. Cursing figures scurried from its doors. Guns roared and lead slammed past the head of the crouching Whisperer. The twisted coupé made a perfect fortress for the long arm of justice, and screams of pain came from his assailants as bullets from his hissing guns found their marks.

A whispering challenge husked from the crime foe's lips. Victory seemed at hand. But crime had not depended upon one set of shock troops. Another cab roared suddenly into the street from behind. Guns blazed from its windows, and The Whisperer found himself in the center of a murderous cross fire.

He whirled, slamming lead at the new enemy. There were at least a dozen guns against him. And the wrecked coupé that had been his bulwark a moment ago now served to shield his enemies. The crooks on that side had seized his division of attention as an opportunity to press close against the coupé. It was a battle that The Whisperer could not win by an exchange of lead.

He dropped, his black clothing against the asphalt pavement practically invisible. The Whisperer rolled. Then he rose to a low crouch and ran. Hoarse cries came from his enemies. They were spread out fanwise. It seemed that The Whisperer was trapped. But suddenly there was a metallic clang of a manhole cover, and The Whisperer was no more.

By the time his enemies found the manhole that led to the conduit system of the lightning company, The Whisperer was many blocks away. He climbed out of a similar manhole in the shadow of the gaunt warehouses that line the Hudson River.

There was a whisper of surprise on his lips. The battle from which he had just escaped should mean something to him. Just what, he was not yet certain. But the gunmen who had assaulted him from the two taxicabs drew a new element into the mystery of John Rourke Nolting's death. They were neither Chinese nor Japs, but white—the men who murder for profit and care not whom they kill nor who employs them!

The Whisperer was not certain what it meant. But he was certain that he wanted to contact the tall white man with the blond hair and mustache.

CHAPTER V.

EVIDENCE OF TORTURE!

The Whisperer ran rapidly up West Street until he was in the shadow of an apparently abandoned warehouse. Lights flickered from a penthouse atop the huge, rambling structure. The penthouse was the apartment of Quick Trigger and his daughter, Tiny. The Whisperer opened a hidden door with a key and slipped into a dimly-lighted lobby. He went to a house phone attached to one wall, lifted the flat receiver and pressed a button.

There was no answer, and The Whisperer chuckled softly. He had wanted to ascertain whether Tiny Traeger was home. The girl officially knew nothing of The Whisperer and his real identity, but there had been many occasions when Wildcat and old Quick wondered how much she had guessed.

Tiny made little secret of the fact that she had plans for Wildcat which she would one day put into execution. But Wildcat held fast to the belief that his career was one of too great danger to share with a woman.

The result was a relationship of apparent constant bickering. But beneath it was a deep and lasting mutual affection.

Finding the apartment empty, The Whisperer ascended in the self-operating elevator and entered a tastefully furnished living room. He sat down at a telephone in a small alcove off the main room and dialed the number of his private phone in police headquarters. Quick Trigger answered.

"Has Slug called in?" Wildcat asked.

Quick rumbled that he had. Slug had trailed the mysterious white man to a pier that was in the shadow of Manhattan Bridge. The man was in the pier building, now; and Slug was standing by, ready to nab him if he came out. The man had jimmied a window to get in, so Slug reasoned he had a burglary charge against him, if nothing else. Quick Trigger gave The Whisperer the number of the pier.

A husky laugh came over the wire.

"That pier belongs to Tagoya Matsimo, Quick," The Whisperer informed the older man. "I'm on my way there by boat."

He cradled the phone and stood up.

At that instant, the door of the automatic elevator opened and Tiny Traeger stepped lightly into the room. She was petite, shapely and enough to stop the heart of most any man. Her eyes—large and expressive eyes that gave Wildcat plenty of trouble—were not directed toward the alcove where The Whisperer stood. She was looking at a clock on the other side of the room, apparently checking on the time of her return. She leaned over slightly, depositing her handbag on a table.

In that instant, The Whisperer moved. Like a dark, streaking shadow, he dived for the door of a closet near the alcove. Tiny Traeger turned, her eyes wide and blue. The Whisperer was but a blur as he slid into the closet.

But the girl could not have helped seeing him; certainly, she must have seen the closet door open and close again. For a moment, her face darkened. Her blue eyes seemed to change to gray, like the waters of a storm-swept sea. Then she smiled. The smile would have worried The Whisperer if he could have seen it. It was a knowing smile. Tiny did nothing for several moments. Then she walked lightly over to the closet. She laughed, her voice a low, rich contralto. She closed the door again and returned to the living room.

The Whisperer moved rapidly. Below the trapdoor in the closet was a long corridor which gave onto several rooms of varying size. Some of these were detention chambers. In them, the long arm of justice often questioned criminals whose lawyers would have been able to free them on legal writs if they had been held by the police. There was also a laboratory as completely equipped as any crime lab in the country.

But the crime foe ignored these, now. He ran swiftly to a door at one end of the corridor and dived into a slanting tube of shiny metal alloy. He shot downward with breath-taking speed, under West Street and into a well-concealed boathouse on the river front.

There were two boats there. He chose a two-engined speedboat with a quarter cabin over the forward cockpit. The motors barked into life, and The Whisperer was out on the river.

The bow lifted, throwing plumes of spray aside as the boat knifed down the river, roared past the Bat-

tery and headed up the East River. Just before he reached Manhattan Bridge, The Whisperer threw a lever on the dashboard. The speed of the boat dropped somewhat. But the racketing of the motors stopped entirely. There was only a soft pur that was scarcely noticeable above the muffled roar of traffic and the night noises of the city.

But other sounds cut through the night. Staccato shots rang out beside the pier warehouse toward which The Whisperer steered his boat. The racketing of a machine gun came like some murderous riveting hammer. Screams of pain blended into a bedlam that brought a hissing oath from the long arm of justice.

Instantly, he cut out the muffler on the motors and jammed the throttle to its topmost notch. The boat leaped ahead like a thing alive. The Whisperer didn't cut his speed until he was fifty feet from the end of the dock. Then he cut the motors and nosed the boat beside a mooring button. He tied only the bow of the boat, then leaped onto the dock, crouching low to avoid detection.

The visored caps of uniformed policemen showed dimly in the light of the street lamps on South Street. A pitched battle was apparently in progress. It appeared that crime had returned from the recent attack upon The Whisperer. The thugs with whom the cops were battling were white men; ugly and scarred hoodlums, typical of the underworld.

With a chuckling hiss, the long arm of justice darted through the darkness toward the building on the pier. He wanted to do some investigating under the cover of that fight, for he did not believe those mobbies out there would know the stakes for which they were fighting, or even who had really hired them. That was usually true with the gunmen hired to do actual shooting.

The Whisperer found a window that had recently been jimmied. He slid it open, climbed in and shut it behind him again.

As he stood there, two obvious odors brought quickening of breath to the crime foe. One of them was the sweetish, sickening odor that had been noticeable in the death of Hong Chung in police headquarters. The other was of burned cloth and acrid smoke.

In the pale beam of his pencil flashlight, he found he was in a room scarcely more than a dozen feet on its widest wall. All four walls of the room were of masonry. And imbedded into one of them were steel rings, attached to which were heavy chains and manacles. A charcoal brazier still smoldered with the heat of a fire now almost dead. And thrust into the graying charcoal was a hooked iron of a type used for a poker—or for branding.

There was little else in the room. No furniture at all. The Whisperer found only one other item of interest. Apparently forgotten, crumbled in one corner, was a hat. He picked it up, washed it in the pale beam of light. The sweatband bore three initials: "J. R. N."

That John Rourke Nolting had recently been tortured in this room, The Whisperer had no doubt at all! Here, in this place owned by Tagoya Matsimo, someone had used a hot iron to extract some information that was worth murder!

The Whisperer could see no other answer. But why, and by whom, he was still in doubt.

Swiftly, he moved across the room and opened the door. His inspection had taken only a few brief seconds. The sound of shooting out in the

street was still a staccato note of violence. The Whisperer crossed a short hallway and burst into a large, low-ceilinged room.

A glaring electric light in the ceiling cast two figures into bold relief. One of them was the tall, blond-mustached man who had followed The Whisperer earlier in the evening. He crouched, half concealed by a packing box of Oriental imports. On the other side of the room, Slug Minor edged his gargantuan form across the floor, his eyes concentrating on the blond man. Both of them had guns; and both were holding fire, apparently waiting for an open shot. The Whisperer's feet scraped slightly on the floor, and both men started. They saw him at the same time.

Slug Minor's gun wavered with brief uncertainty. Slug had no particular desire to kill The Whisperer. It was his private opinion—one not popular at police headquarters, however—that the long arm of justice sometimes performed a needed task.

The Whisperer took advantage of the momentary surprise and hesitation. One supersilenced pistol flared and the single electric bulb exploded. In the darkness, the enemy of crime leaped across the room. He gauged his distance accurately. Muscles like steel cables brought up a compact fist, smashing against Slug Minor's jaw with a force that he later believed could not have come from a man of The Whisperer's build.

Slug wasn't knocked out. But he was groggy, confused for a moment. The Whisperer twisted and flicked on his flash once more. He looked at the tall blond man.

"Come," he said. "I have a boat outside. We can escape while the police are otherwise engaged."

He tore through the hallway, across the torture room and out of the window through which he had entered, pausing only briefly to view the battle in the street.

Cringing thugs had their hands in the air. The police needed no support against their adversaries. And The Whisperer knew that Slug Minor would recover rapidly.

He leaped into the speedboat moored at the outer end of the dock.

"Cast off the line and jump aboard," he ordered his fellow fugitive. "We'll have to move quickly."

The blond man did as he was told. The Whisperer kicked the motors into life and headed toward New York Bay. Once off South Ferry, he had no fear of pursuit or capture. In designing this speedboat, he had made certain that it had a comfortable margin of speed over the fastest police boats. In addition, this one was sufficiently sturdy to go outside into the Atlantic Ocean.

And it was toward the Atlantic that the long arm of justice was headed, now. He had a definite objective and hoped to add to his knowledge of the Nolting mystery from his present companion.

The blond man was watching The Whisperer as they roared past the South Street piers. There was a peculiar expression on his face. It seemed to show doubt as to whether he was being rescued, or merely getting deeper into trouble.

For that matter, The Whisperer himself did not know which answer it would prove to be. That might be up to his passenger.

As they shot past South Ferry and the Battery, The Whisperer turned to see searchlights flashing from police boats moving out of the harbor precinct at the foot of Battery Place. He had only one concern as he held

the wheel over, turning the fast boat on a course for the Narrows.

Dawn was a scant hour away, now. He must lose all contact with the police before then. Otherwise, a high-winged amphibian monoplane could take the air from harbor precinct and catch him with little trouble.

He chuckled softly as his boat roared through the Narrows, past Gravesend Bay and on a course for the blinker buoy off Rockaway. The sea was calm, broken only by gentle swells, under the black sky of early morning. Neither moon nor stars showed in the sky. The Whisperer's green eyes flickered strangely as he turned to survey his passenger.

The man had a sharp, slightly out-thrust jaw, and his thin lips were now compressed tightly. There were sharply etched lines on his face and his pale eyes were almost colorless.

"Who are you?" The Whisperer demanded. "I have a right to know whom I have saved from the police."

Pale eyes surveyed The Whisperer with thinly veiled hostility. The lips of the blond man scarcely seemed to move.

"My name is Asherton," he said in an oddly metallic voice. "Gregory Asherton. And that means nothing to you."

The two men glared at each other for a moment. The long arm of justice realized intuitively that this man would yield no more information than he wanted to tell. Not without torture.

"What were you doing in the warehouse of Tagoya Matsimo?" he asked. "What has Matsimo to do with the murder of John Rourke Nolting?"

That rang a bell. The pale eyes widened slightly.

"Murder? Are you sure he is dead?"

A soft chuckle answered him.

"Your surprise seems genuine. Perhaps you do not know, either. We are now going where we may find that answer."

The one who called himself Gregory Asherton did not ask where that might be. He merely stared at The Whisperer, faint hostility still apparent in his eyes. He waited for the crime foe to continue.

"Tagoya Matsimo has a summer home on the salt marshes of Great South Bay on Long Island," The Whisperer said. "We will pay him a call. If Nolting is still alive, I intend to save him."

Asherton was silent while the black-clad figure set the boat down the long stretch toward Jones Inlet at forty-five miles an hour. Salt

Pepsi-Cola is made only by Pepsi-Cola Company, Long Island City, N. Y. Bottled locally by authorized bottlers.

spray stung their faces like hail. Asherton looked ahead into the fingers of dawn in the eastern sky.

"Nolting is a very important man," he said tersely. "Perhaps he is more valuable dead than alive, to some persons. But not to me."

A chilling laugh mingled with the roar of the motors.

"There are others of that opinion," The Whisperer said. "Unless *you* are the one behind it all."

Asherton's eyes were stony. He refused to comment.

The trim speedboat raced through Jones Inlet wide open. The Whisperer throttled down only slightly to go through the narrow space between the spiles of the causeway bridges. Then he opened up the throttle again.

He had left the open ocean for the narrow, twisting inner channel behind Jones Beach. Here, half hidden by tall swamp grass, The Whisperer believed he was safe. Dawn was now definitely established. Sullen, gray clouds were banked menacingly in the summer sky. At the first sight of the police amphibian, The Whisperer could throttle down, dart into a clump of swamp grass and remain hidden until the danger had passed.

Near Captree, he cut northward through the narrow State channel toward Babylon. Then he lined along the south shore of Long Island into Great South Bay.

There are dozens of gaunt mansions on the salt flats between Babylon and Bay Shore. Some of them are alive with the laughter of children and sport shiny limousines in their driveways. Others have fallen to seed and stand with flapping shutters as gaunt reminders of affluent days gone by. Many have reverted to the township for taxes.

It was toward one of the latter that The Whisperer headed his boat. A narrow canal led through the flats to a huge frame-and-stucco building of the heavy, unwieldy architectural lines popular at the turn of the century. The house towered out of a grove of scrub pines like some great humpbacked sentinel. It was nearly a mile from any other habitation.

The Whisperer had learned that Tagoya Matsimo had bought this property at a tax sale, some time ago. He hoped he would find some answers to his problems here.

And as the boat swept up the little canal, motors throttled down and muffled into silence, now, he knew he was going to find something of promise. A struggle was going on at the Matsimo summer estate. It was a struggle in which yellow men were fighting other yellow men.

Chuckling softly, the long arm of justice watched. He cut the motor out entirely and let the speedboat drift in toward a low, wooden dock. Another sleek speedboat was already there. There was little sound from the green sward that abutted the big house. Knives flashed in the early morning gloom, and there were occasional cries of pain!

Leaping to the low dock, The Whisperer beckoned to Asherton.

"We must skirt them and get to the house," he said huskily. "Perhaps we will learn what we both wish to know."

The black-clad battler ran lightly. Asherton followed him with equally little sound. A back door swung idly in the early morning breeze. Supersilenced guns in his hands, The Whisperer plunged into a shedlike storeroom that apparently gave onto the kitchen.

There were bodies in that room—corpses of yellow men. Some of them

were known to The Whisperer. They were the dregs of Chinatown's underworld; hatchet men who in their own race worked for profit; Orientals with neither conscience nor loyalty to any but themselves.

An eerie whisper of surprise drifted into the air as The Whisperer stood there. He noted that these men had not been knifed or shot. And he smelled that sickish, sweetish odor that had before been an invisible accompaniment of death. The Whisperer had already identified it to his own satisfaction. It was an advanced development of chloropicrin, a deadly gas. The odor and the subsequent quick dissipation in the atmosphere were typical. Even as he stood there, now, the smell of the murder gas vanished from the air.

The Whisperer moved cautiously into the kitchen and through another room adjoining. And there he found John Rourke Nolting.

There was no question of identity. The Whisperer had known the chemist and philanthropist well. Nolting sat on a chair. His head was thrown back limply, and there was a wide gash in his throat! It gave the horrible effect of a second, grinning mouth. Raw marks of torture were on the chemist's bare feet and legs.

Whatever secrets John Nolting had possessed, he would tell no more.

CHAPTER VI.

DOUBLE ALIBI.

Behind The Whisperer, Gregory Asherton began to curse in his flat, metallic voice. He paused, staring at The Whisperer. And in that moment, a strange hush seemed to fall over the Matsimo estate. Swiftly, the mysterious Nemesis of the underworld leaped to a window and looked out.

The embattled yellow men had vanished from the lawn. There seemed not to be a single moving, living thing on the estate. Silently, The Whisperer turned back and padded through the room in which John Nolting sat slumped in death. The room beyond was a large one and dim. Heavy furniture ranged the walls. Halfway across it, a whisper of surprise came from the crime foe. Stooping quickly over an object that had tripped him, he flicked on his pencil flash.

There was a body there, a writhing, struggling form. The Whisperer turned it over and looked into the gagged features of Tagoya Matsimo, the importer and worker in the cause of peace. There was no mistaking the bonds that held Matsimo. They were genuine enough. And there was no mistaking the fear that was in his eyes. It was a fear akin to terror.

"Iss terrible," he gasped when The Whisperer untied the gag. "Someone iss take Mr. Nolting here and kill him. I do not understand. I find him when I drive out from city."

Matsimo sat erect when his wrists and ankles were free. He stared suddenly past The Whisperer. His eyes blinked and he gasped.

At the same instant, there was a clanging thud behind The Whisperer. He whirled. The doorway behind which Gregory Asherton had stood a moment before was closed now by a solid metal slab, The Whisperer turned back to Matsimo.

"Who is that?"

Matsimo shrugged.

"It iss a fire door. Who iss operating it, I do not know."

The long arm of justice was not satisfied.

"Did you torture Nolting and then bring him out here to kill him?"

Matsimo galvanized. His voice

became a shrill, almost hysterical scream.

"Why should I do that? Even if I do not work for peace and, as some wrongfully suspect, am working for the nation of my birth, I should not torture him. My nation would only want him dead; would want Nolting and his secret put where no Chinese could ever find them. But this—" Matsimo shuddered. "—this is madness."

The Whisperer's green eyes bored into the stoic Oriental. He believed that the importer's hysterical words carried the imprint of truth. The Whisperer was silent for a moment. In that momentary hush, there came the sound of a low, anguished groan. It seemed to come from a front entryway, which adjoined the room in which Matsimo had been found. Together, the two men rushed to the entryway.

The man who was groaning was already struggling to his feet when they got there. It was Nuto Klee, the skinny, weak-jawed Eurasian who had been a prisoner with The Whisperer in the Chinatown dungeon.

Nuto Klee shuddered as he stood there. He put one hand to his head. The fingers came away stained with red.

"G-g-gosh," the half-caste moaned in his quavering voice. "I d-don't remember anything after getting out of the car with Mr. Matsimo."

The Whisperer turned back to the importer. Matsimo had retrieved his glasses from somewhere. His small eyes were live things behind them. His lips were working strangely.

"You both came in the car?" The Whisperer snapped.

Nuto Klee nodded.

"I met Mr. Matsimo right after I left police headquarters. We drove out here and were attacked when we got out of the car and came into the house. After that, we saw—Nolting."

Klee shuddered violently.

Tagoya Matsimo looked from Nuto Klee to The Whisperer. Suddenly, that awful fear was again mirrored in his eyes. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"Iss right," he said. "I hired Nuto Klee to protect me. We came out in the car."

The Whisperer's tones sharpened. His words were a husky challenge.

"Who came in the speedboat that bears the trade name of Matsimo & Co.?" he demanded.

Tagoya Matsimo's eyes popped.

"The boat? Iss here?"

There was incredulity in his tone. Then he seemed to come to a decision that surprised him.

"It must be the murder. Perhaps he is still here!"

"We will search the house," The Whisperer husked. "You will lead the way."

Sweating and shaking, Tagoya Matsimo did as he was required. The big house was a labyrinth of rooms and passageways.

The importer had apparently spent large sums of money in remodeling the interior. The decorative plan was about equally divided between the Occident and the Orient. The walls of some of the rooms had been torn down and replaced by sliding panels of translucent silk and paper. That part of the house was a veritable sounding board. The slightest noise made in one room could be heard in the one adjoining.

A patter of running feet came to The Whisperer's trained ears there. He halted the two men with him and located the direction of the sound.

"Sorry to destroy a wall," he said.

He plunged straight through the

flimsy panel of silk and paper. There was a short scream on the other side. Then The Whisperer came back into the room dragging his prisoner with him. It was Ming Lautoy, the attractive sloe-eyed daughter of Charley Lautoy, leader of the Golden Tree Tong!

Ming Lautoy stood proudly erect when The Whisperer released her. Her dark eyes looked fearlessly into his.

"I believe that Tagoya Matsimo had knowledge," she said, without waiting to be asked a question. "So I hid myself in the luggage compartment of his car and came here with him."

The Whisperer spoke softly but with a husky insistance.

"Did they both come in the sedan?"

Ming Lautoy shrugged.

"I heard only the rumble of the wheels on the road. I cannot say. When the car stopped, I remained hidden for many minutes, hoping to avoid being seen. Then—"

Her face blanched and she faltered, looking imploringly at The Whisperer.

"And so you found—" he prompted.

"John Rourke Nolting murdered," the girl blurted. "Murdered for the thing that could save China; that could end the centuries in which a great people have starved in famine!"

The girl's breasts rose and fell excitedly.

"He was tortured to feed someone's greed," she gasped. "For money. But not by my people—"

Nuto Klee's hollow voice cut in.

"Not by your people," he purred. "But perhaps by a white man?"

The girl's dark eyes glowed strangely. Her voice caught raggedly.

"No, no!" she gasped. "It couldn't be!"

Then she got control of herself.

"I do not know what you mean," she snapped. "But I do know a hatchet man who is ashamed of a service he has been in. When I find him, I will know who *did* kill the benefactor of my people!"

A dead silence followed Ming Lautoy's unveiled threat. The Whisperer looked quickly at the two other men in the room. Neither Tagoya Matsimo nor Nuto Klee displayed any emotion at the girl's outburst. Both of them looked at her with flat, beady eyes. The Whisperer watched them intently; so intently, in fact, that he did not immediately hear the sound of movement behind him!

There was a rush of men through the silk-and-paper panel, and The Whisperer whirled to meet it. Slant-eyed knife men crowded into the room, and a medley of curses in three languages struck the crime foe's ears.

A new surprise swept his mind, then. This motley array of killers, working now in harmony and with apparently a single objective, had been split into two warring factions when he and Gregory Asherton had arrived not long before!

The evil-visaged hatchet men of Chinatown and the sibilant-voiced enemies of China were working hand in hand!

Two powerful-torsoed killers were in the lead. They passed right by The Whisperer. It was not until then that he realized their quarry was Ming Lautoy and not himself.

Ming Lautoy stood motionless. On her face was the calm stoic fatalism so characteristic of the Chinese. If death were waiting for her, she was ready.

With a whispering cry of rage, the

A battle-ax embedded itself in the door jamb beside the girl's head. The Whisperer twisted, spewing lead from his pistols at the onrushing attackers.

enemy of crime hurtled across the room like something out of a catapult. He plunged into Ming Lautoy and, together, the two of them ripped through another of the decorative panels. The black-clad scrapper managed to take up the shock of their impact against the matting-covered floor.

A howl of rage went up behind them. The Orientals crowded across the other room and into the ragged opening in the wall. The Whisperer scrambled to his feet and lifted Ming Lautoy to hers.

"Run!" he ordered. "Try to get into the other part of the house where we can barricade ourselves."

Ming Lautoy ran. A two-bladed battle-ax whizzed through the air, imbedding itself in a door jamb beside the girl's head.

Whispering sounds of defiance came from her protector. He twisted as he ran, spewing lead and blue flame from his supersilenced pistols. Ugly-faced hatchet men dropped, blood gushing from mortal wounds. The hatchet men wavered. But not their sibilant-voiced companions. A fanaticism seemed to drive them willingly into certain death. They died without show of fear.

The Whisperer urged the girl to greater speed. As they raced through a doorway, The Whisperer noticed the thickness of the wall. It seemed to be a fireproof partition, dividing the two halves of the great house. The door, itself, was of steel.

The black-clad scrapper slammed the door shut, swung the metal bolts into place and turned to survey the

room. A husky exclamation of surprise came from his lips.

On a small table against one wall was a phone!

Chuckling at that turn in his luck, The Whisperer leaped to the instrument. He scooped it up, listened with a question of his face. Then his eyes lighted. The line was open. An operator's voice came on the wire, and The Whisperer snapped the number of Quick Trigger's apartment. He wanted Quick Trigger on this job and didn't want any possible bungling by Bolton or anyone else less effcient.

He now believed that he and the girl could get away. But whether they did or not, he wanted a complete record of what had happened so far to be in the proper hands.

There was no answer at first at the Traeger penthouse apartment. As The Whisperer stood there, the phone to his ear, his eyes lighted on the metal door that he had just bolted. There was a hissing sound there. Then a tiny, white-hot tongue of flame pierced the portal. Oxy-acetylene gas! It would cut that steel door like a knife through butter. With a hoarse cry, The Whisperer swung around to find another means of escape. Then he got a new surprise.

He saw another door all right. But he also saw Ming Lautoy bent over the bound figure of Gregory Asherton. Ming was untying the knots that held him, and her voice was filled with anxiety as she talked to the man.

The Whisperer was about to demand an explanation of what had happened to the tall, blond man. But a tinny voice came over the telephone to him.

"If you will state your message, please, it will be taken care of."

That meant that Quick Trigger was neither at home nor at headquarters. The number had a double hook-up, one to the apartment and also to a private phone in Quick's headquarters office. The latter instrument was under lock and key, when the old deputy wasn't in his office, to prevent anyone else from intercepting a message. The automatic recorder would take The Whisperer's message and a glowing ruby light would notify Quick as soon as he returned either to headquarters or to the penthouse.

The Whisperer swiftly outlined what had happened. He instructed Quick Trigger to come out to the Long Island estate as quickly as he could. He also suggested an investigation of Charley Lee Lautoy immediately.

He didn't have an opportunity to say any more. The tongue of flame eating through the steel had cut an almost perfect square. There was a crash then as the square fell inward to the floor.

"Run!" The Whisperer yelled for the second time. "Both of you get clear. We'll have questions later!"

Ming Lautoy plunged against the other door. As she did, Asherton leaned over and pulled up one trouser leg. Whoever had tied him up had missed a leg holster that pressed against the inward curve at his knee. He took a flat automatic from it.

"Come on," he said to The Whisperer. "Maybe we can all make it."

He plunged through the door after Ming Lautoy. The wraithlike battler in black heard Asherton shooting as he ran. He followed to the door, turned there and waited for a fraction of a second. The pursuers who had cut through the door had delayed for a moment or two. One of them tested the edge of the ragged

cut. The hot steel smoldered against his clothing.

Then the yellow man came through. The Whisperer chuckled harshly. Blue flame cut the air and a second slant-eyed man had to come through the hole. He stepped over the body of the one who had preceded him.

The Whisperer's eerie voice was a challenge. He would stay at this door long enough to give Asherton and the girl a chance to get clear. If he didn't make it then, he hoped that Quick Trigger would get his message promptly.

CHAPTER VII.

TINY TAKES THE TRAIL.

Circumstances brought other ears to that message, however, before old Quick reached his penthouse. It so happened that he had left headquarters for his home just before The Whisperer called. And immediately after the call had been completed, Tiny Traeger came into the apartment.

The girl saw the red light glowing. She frequently took messages for Quick Trigger. She took this one, now. The voice did not identify itself as that of The Whisperer.

The voice merely said: "This is Dunk Smith, Quick. I have some instructions for you."

Tiny Traeger listened. She might have remembered the dim figure she had seen plunging into the closet that housed the trapdoor. Of course, she did know that Dunk Smith was a shabby figure who frequently called on her father to give him some "inside information" on the underworld. And it might have occurred to her that from no one but Wildcat Gordon would her father have taken "instructions."

The girl's eyes were wide as she listened. They were somberly gray and troubled. When the message was finished, she picked up another phone and called police headquarters, but learned that her father was not there. The lieutenant on desk duty did not know where he was. Tiny hung up.

An expression of indecision was on her face for a moment. Then she rose, went to a writing table and scribbled a brief note. This, she pinned to a door jamb with a thumb tack.

Tiny went to her room, took a small, pearl-handled automatic from a drawer and dropped it into her handbag. She powdered her nose, went down the elevator and called a cab.

She missed her father's return from headquarters by not more than a dozen minutes. It was a circumstance which caused old Quick to rumble mighty oaths and stamp up and down the floor when he read her note and had listened also to the message from The Whisperer.

As Charley Lee Lautoy had told The Whisperer when the police were pounding on the door of the Golden Tree Tong, Richard Traeger was his friend. It was also true that Tiny Traeger had for some years been a good friend to the pretty daughter of the tong chieftain.

"Contact Charley Lautoy," the voice of Dunk Smith had said in the message for old Quick. "Tell him that his daughter is a captive here. Bring him with you, if you can."

Tiny Traeger gave the cab driver the Pell Street address of the Golden Tree Tong. She settled back in the seat, wondering what lay behind the peculiar circumstances that had been outlined in the telephone message. Dunk Smith had related only the

physical things that had happened, but had not touched on the possible reasons behind them.

Tiny's eyes sparkled as the cab went down to Canal Street and started east on that thoroughfare. She would have insisted that she was doing this only because it was what she believed her father would have wanted. She would have indignantly denied that she was bored with the refusal of both her father and Wildcat to let her help them in their pursuit of criminals.

Her cheeks were glowing and her breath was rapid as the cab driver cut down the Bowery and angled over to turn into Pell.

Early morning Chinatown was noisily awake. Trucks and pleasure cars lined the curbs. Tiny paid off her cab some distance from the entrance of the Golden Tree Tong. She walked briskly toward it, her steps quick and sure. Tiny was not at all uneasy in Chinatown. She was well known to the members of the mighty tong. And none in Chinatown would molest the daughter of the respected Quick Trigger—not, that is, under ordinary circumstances.

But these circumstances were not ordinary. Tiny's first hint of that came when there was no answer to her press of the button at the tong headquarters. That was unusual. Tiny knew their customs; she knew that there should have been someone on duty twenty-four hours a day. She waited impatiently, a little of unreasoning panic mounting within her. Then there was a voice at her elbow.

"So sorry, missy. You wish to see someone?"

Tiny Traeger looked at the man's small oval face. It was oddly twisted on his shoulders.

"I want to see Charles Lautoy," she said flatly.

The little man with the twisted head bowed and shook hands with himself.

"Has been much trouble," he said. "Come with me. I take you to Charles Lautoy."

Tiny hesitated. She saw two other figures in the dimness of the hall. But, in the broad daylight of New York City, what could happen to her? Tiny shrugged and followed. It did not until later occur to her that these Orientals were not Chinese.

The little yellow man led the way out of Pell Street, through Chatham Square and over Oliver Street toward the East River. He padded rapidly along, dodging pushcart peddlers, squalling children and buxom women who came from the surrounding tenements.

It was a walk of several blocks. It was only natural for Tiny to wonder why her escort had not taken a cab. She looked behind. Two other men followed like automatons, keeping a distance of several yards. No one who saw the tableau could have been at all certain that the trim girl was being escorted. The Orientals seemed to pay no attention to her. She might have been strolling along of her own free will and without any influence by the man ahead and the two behind.

It was thus that they arrived at a narrow alley that ran between two docks on the East River. At the end of the alley there was a shedlike structure with blinds pulled tightly over the windows. The man in the lead rapped three times on a door and was quickly admitted.

A window shade shot up suddenly with a snap that could be heard outside. Tiny looked instinctively at

it. She saw the serene face of Charles Lautoy outlined for a brief instant. Then the shade was pulled down again. The tong leader's features seemed calm and unperturbed. They were reassuring to Tiny. When the door opened again and the yellow man beckoned to her, she stepped through it without hesitation. It slammed behind her, then, and she realized what a mistake she had made.

Charley Lautoy was bound to a metal chair. His features were calm and in repose because he was unconscious. His head was held erect by a brace of the type photographers used a quarter of a century ago.

The proud Manchu stirred as Tiny watched, her mouth open with sudden horror. Charley Lautoy's eyes opened. They were at first only dimly aware of where he was. Then they were filled with fear, with terror.

Tiny Traeger knew that the leader of the tong had never before been known to be afraid. It was not difficult for her to realize the gravity of the situation. And, realizing it, she reacted in a manner quite characteristic of her.

She looked at the small yellow man who had led her here. There was scorn and contempt in her gaze.

"You won't get away with this," she said. "We have laws in this country, and we have people who can enforce them."

The little man smirked. He bobbed his twisted head.

"Iss unfortunate," he said. "I am Po. If things are as they should be, perhaps you will live."

He said it as if such a contingency would be an undeserved favor. Tiny Traeger's impulse was to imply hotly that she had left word for her father that she had gone to Chinatown. It was well known that Quick Trigger was a human bloodhound on a trail. It was certainly not to be denied that an excellent chance existed that he would trail her to this shabby hideout.

It may be that Tiny was not as much of an actress as she believed she was. Or perhaps her captor knew more than she understood. At any rate, he smirked. He moved to a cabinet with a tilted mirror at the top and flicked a switch. It was a television set.

"Iss simple to keep track of enemy when enemy does not know iss being done."

Tiny watched, a look of renewed fear on her face. A bluish-green image of the front door of the warehouse beneath the Traeger penthouse flickered upon the mirror. There was nothing else for a moment. Then Quick Trigger burst out of the door. A look of fierce rage contorted his rugged features. A departmental sedan was at the curb. Quick climbed into this. The microphone pickup that was part of the television set brought a snarling of gears into the room as the sedan slammed into motion, turned and headed downtown.

It became apparent then that the television-pickup lens was mounted on an automobile. The lens followed Quick Trigger around the corner and kept shortly behind him. Occasionally other vehicles cut in between the two. But always the trailing lens caught up with its quarry.

Po laughed harshly at Tiny's exclamation of surprise.

"Iss not surprising we expected missey," he said. "Iss not surprising we will get everything we want."

He turned on Charley Lautoy with a snarl. One yellow hand slashed across the unprotected face of the tong leader. It slashed again, cutting the flesh with a gold ring. Blood

trickled from the cheek of the proud Manchu.

Charley Lautoy's eyes flashed with bitterness and hatred. He uttered harsh words in a tongue Tiny Traeger could not understand. They did not have the lilt of Chinese. But the little man, Po, understood. He squealed with rage, then kicked Lautoy's legs with heavy, military boots.

"You have stolen the thing we sought to destroy, pig of Han," he screamed in English. "You will tell us where it is, or you will die a thousand deaths. The first of them you will get now."

He drew a short-handled whip of many thongs. Each thong was capped with lead buttons. His face a mask of cruelty, he slashed downward with it, laying open the entire left cheek of the Manchu! Charley Lautoy's expression did not change. But a gloating cruelty crept over the features of Po.

Tiny Traeger's eyes strayed to the mirror of the television device. There was a sudden tenseness in her expression. And apparently it was not lost to Charley Lautoy. His lips were clenched in pain as Po hesitated. But in that instant, the tong chieftain straightened against his bonds. Words dripped from his lips. No knowledge of language was needed to explain the context of those words. Lautoy's eyes stripped the little man of every dignity he might have known. The words capped it all. Po screamed like an animal.

The whip slashed down again and again! The silken robes on Lautoy's shoulders split into bloody ribbons. Red rivulets ran down the lines of his face.

But Tiny Traeger's eyes were riveted on that television mirror.

The scene moved down Pell Street. The doorway of the Golden Tree Tong was framed dimly over the tops of two parked cars. The gaunt form of Quick Trigger pounded over the sidewalk toward it. He disappeared, then came out a moment later, an expression of bewilderment on his face.

A scurrying figure in Chinese garb sidled up beside him, then. Suddenly, Quick Trigger was listening, nodding. The arm of the Chinese swung toward the river. He pointed, gesticulating wildly as he spoke. Quick turned and strode toward the Bowery.

The television set cut off then. The mirror clouded and went dark. Tiny Traeger turned back to Po and Charley Lautoy. The tall Manchu's head was wabbling. His eyes glazed as he fought to remain erect and taunt the flogger into complete concentration.

But then his noble gesture, a pain-racked attempt to prevent Po from watching that approach of old Quick Trigger, came to nothing. One of the two yellow men who had walked behind Tiny Traeger from Chatham Square to this dingy hide-out, stepped silently ahead of Tiny. He spoke in low tones and pointed to the television set.

The greenish light wavered on again at that moment. It showed Quick Trigger. And it showed a stretch of pushcart-littered Oliver Street, two blocks from the shack in which Tiny was now held.

A fleeting look of hope crossed her features, but not for long. Po whirled, dropping the bloody cat. His lips twisted into a snarl of hate and contempt. It was obvious that Po considered himself a superior being. Perhaps of a superior race.

"We will leave," he said. "Your sire can have whatever we leave for him to find."

Po clapped his hands three times. Three yellow-faced henchmen

rushed to him, bowed and without words untied Charley Lautoy from the metal chair to which he had been bound.

Tiny Traeger bit her lips as she watched them carry the half-conscious tong leader from the room. Charley Lautoy had indeed brought torture upon himself in an attempt to let Quick Trigger come upon his captors unnoticed. It is a brave man who can be lashed into unconsciousness without uttering a cry of plaint or protest.

The three little men trotted with their burden. They went down a long incline to a wet, slimy floating platform that was beneath a huge, spreading dock. Tiny Traeger was forced down after them, a gun prodding into the small of her back.

When they reached the floating platform, Po came up behind her and seized her wrists roughly. He bound them adroitly, using a thin, strong silk cord. Then he stuffed a gag into her mouth and tied it. Thus made helpless, she was shoved along the dim platform to the deck of a small boat moored there.

Winglike hatches were open on the boat. In the yawning cavity beneath them, Tiny saw Charley Lautoy, also bound and gagged. There was another figure there, treated similarly. Tiny Traeger recognized it. This was Johnny Sing Wong, with whom, in the company of Miss Lautoy, Tiny had enjoyed Chinese rice cakes and tea many times.

Po shoved Tiny down into the hold. As she was pushed well below the deck level, she noticed that the balance of the deck was littered with old anchors, rope and flotsam. The hull of the boat, which looked old and decrepit, bore the name of a well-known marine-salvage company. No one would pay it the slightest attention as it chugged through the muddy waters of Manhattan's East River.

TINY TRAEGER

● Tiny is the dark-haired, pert daughter of old Quick Trigger. A diminutive bundle of loveliness, she nurses a secret devotion for Wildcat Gordon.

Po grinned with evil pleasure. He waved to a rough-looking white man who was apparently in charge of the craft, a burly fellow with a black patch over one eye. Then Po and his three yellow companions climbed down with the prisoners. The wing hatch was lowered and Tiny could hear the scrape of wood and metal as the crew strewed enough of the salvage stuff over the boat to conceal the existence of the hatch.

The boat chugged noisily out from

under the dock, then. Tiny could not tell what direction it was taking.

What seemed to be interminable hours passed. Then a new motion became apparent. The battered boat began to heave up and down with the motion caused by an ocean swell. Then there were other scraping sounds. The wing hatch was pulled open and gray daylight streamed in. The white boatman looked down and grinned.

"O. K., skipper. You can take it now."

Po crawled out and looked to the eastward. The wind was raw and cold. Grayish wisps swept along on top of rapidly forming whitecaps.

"Fog," Po concluded. "We may be able to get through the inlet before it comes down. Hurry!"

Whatever else Po was, he apparently knew how to handle a boat. He opened another hatch, threw over a lever, and motors that did not belong on a junk roared in a purring crescendo of power. The "salvage scow" sprang into life, knifing through the whitecaps like a thing alive.

Po again surveyed the weather. He rubbed his hands.

"We will soon be in Great South Bay," he said.

Tiny Traeger's head snapped up. Great South Bay! She remembered the location that Dunk Smith had given. New hope came into her blue-green eyes. She spoke softly in tones so low that none could hear except herself.

"See you soon, Wildcat."

CHAPTER VIII.

GAS ATTACK!

But The Whisperer—really Wildcat Gordon in disguise—was far too busy to be thinking of Tiny Traeger. He assumed that Tiny was safely curled up on the big divan in her apartment, perhaps reading a book.

The Whisperer's back was still toward the door through which Gregory Asherton and Ming Lautoy had vanished. Four corpses were on the floor before the ragged torch-cut hole in the metal door across the room.

A weird hiss burst from the wraithlike fighter's lips as he heard the sound of harsh, sibilant voices and the slap of running feet outside. The sounds came through one of the windows of the room. The Whisperer laughed. The fanatical killers were going to close in from behind, flanking him on two sides.

The Whisperer turned and ran swiftly through the door that had been a pathway of escape for Gregory Asherton and Ming Lautoy. He plunged down a narrow stairway to a large, bare room with small, barred windows. There were three windows. And as he entered through one of them, a second opened to admit yellow men with wild, hating eyes.

With a chuckle of defiance, The Whisperer twisted across the room, answering fire with his supersilenced pistols. He ripped open the third door to the room as a possible means of escape and plunged again downward into a blackness that swallowed him completely. His feet struck a concrete floor then, and he had a sensation of being in a tomb; there was the wet dankness of a deep cellar, of a storm sewer or a cave.

He flicked on his pencil flash, found a light switch and turned it on. The room in which he found himself had no windows. It was entirely of concrete—walls, floor and ceiling. The only means of entrance or exit was the passageway through which he had come. And through

that now came stealthy footsteps.

The place was filled with supplies —canvas, paint, brushes, tools of various kinds, rolls of screening and— an eerie whisper drifted up the passageway—there was fly paper.

The Whisperer chuckled in ironical mirth as he ripped sheets of fly paper apart. He found a small spirit lamp in the mess of tools on a workbench. He lighted it and spread piece after piece of fly paper on a section of screening above.

The Whisperer thought of Hong Chung. He thought of the hatchet men he had found on the floor above in this mystery house. Chloropicrin had been used to kill those men; chloropicrin with its distinctive odor of heated fly paper! And these wild-eyed killers whom he could now hear creeping down that passageway were the users of chloropicrin. They would know its distinctive odor!

The Whisperer chuckled as the sticky film on the fly paper softened and began to run. The storeroom was stifling with the heavy pungency of the stuff. But then it began to roll up that single passageway. The Whisperer fanned with his hands. Then he saw a small electric ventilating fan plugged into a wall socket. With a harsh laugh, he turned it on, blowing more of the odor of heated fly paper up that passageway.

A scream welled down then. It was a choking scream of terror. Feet pounded as potential killers fought to get clear of each other on the stairs. Perhaps these yellow men could stand up against hot lead and die without visible emotion. But there was something in the thought of poison gas in a dark, damp passageway that swept terror through their hearts.

They ran, not in orderly retreat but in fear-maddened flight. And each one that was trampled underfoot by his fellows added to the panic of the rest.

The Whisperer raced after them! In the room above, the Orientals tried to rally; but they were too frightened for united action. The Whisperer moved among them. He unscrewed a light bulb from a wall socket and rammed the snout of one supersilenced pistol into it.

There was a sharp crackling spark and the smell of ozone as the current short-circuited. All the lights went out in that part of the house.

There was only an eerie whispering laugh as the now invisible foe of crime drifted across the dark, windowless room and out into the chill air and fog.

Scrub pine and heavy green shrubbery were banked close to the house. The Whisperer dodged through it toward a utility house that looked as though it might have been originally intended to hold tools for gardening.

Drizzling rain enveloped him as he ran toward the ancient tool house. The wet wind out of the northeast smelled heavily of fog. But The Whisperer feared that it would take more than fog to conceal him sufficiently for him to live and operate against his enemies.

Staccato shots roared out from an upper window of the big house as he ran. Lead slapped into the gravel path beside his feet. He weaved and dodged, then hit the flimsy wooden door of the tool house at a full run. The lock ripped from it and the door flapped inward.

He noticed only one thing in that place. There was a telephone extension there. With a soft chuckle, he scooped it up. If it were still connected—

"Number please."

The Whisperer husked the number of police headquarters. Then he ripped the odd dental plates from his mouth. He would have to take a chance on someone eavesdropping; chance that his enemies would listen in and realize that The Whisperer was Wildcat Gordon.

The desk lieutenant sounded extremely relieved when he recognized the brisk tones of Wildcat Gordon.

"They've been looking everywhere for you, commissioner," he blurted. "Deputy Traeger, Bolton and Slug Minor have just left the harbor precinct in the amphibian. I don't know where they're going."

Wildcat grunted and said there were no further instructions. After the lieutenant broke the connection, Wildcat listened for a moment, straining to hear the telltale click that would indicate someone listening in on another extension. He heard nothing until the operator came back on the line. Apparently, the tool-house extension had been forgotten in the turmoil of shooting.

The Whisperer replaced his dental plates. He climbed out of a rear window of the tool house and slipped into a heavy thicket of scrub pine. Working his way slowly toward the bay, he skirted the edge of the formal lawns of the estate, concealing himself in the high swamp grass.

Harsh, sibilant voices came through the wet, rainy air. Feet scraped on the gravel path he had left. Other feet sloshed through puddles in the grassy lawn. The singsong Chinese of the hatchet men mingled with the harsher voices. The Orientals were trying to surround The Whisperer and finish the job they had started in the house!

Three of the yellow men broke from the waving grass and started shooting. The Whisperer was in a tiny clearing at the moment. He whirled, husking a warning challenge, and began to reply with his supersilenced guns. He had reloaded them as he had moved through the tall swamp grass.

One of the Orientals twisted, screaming in pain. He grabbed at his shoulder.

The Whisperer kept on shooting. The other two of the men went down with bullets in their legs. Then another gun boomed behind The Whisperer, and lead tugged at his coat sleeve. He whirled. Two other yellow men were there. One of them was squeezing the trigger of a heavy gun, aimed straight at The Whisperer. With a hiss of defiance, the black-clad scrapper brought up his own weapons. Then he hesitated.

From the tall grass behind the yellow man, an arm thrust out, crooked at the elbow. It circled the yellow gunman's neck and whipped him up like a puppet attached to a fateful string. The Whisperer caught only a glimpse of the cold, pale eyes of Gregory Asherton. Then he whirled, blasting lead at the second of the yellow fighters who had opened fire from behind him. The Oriental went down. And when The Whisperer turned back, the other one was gone. Neither Asherton nor the girl was in sight.

But The Whisperer did not follow. A new circumstance intervened to prevent that. A steady, ever-increasing drone vibrated in the wet air. It was a plane, flying low and coming rapidly closer.

Oriental cries rent the air:

"Aiya! Aiya! Run!"

The Whisperer stood stock-still. He recognized the particular pitch of that motor. He had piloted it often enough. This was the police amphibian, and it meant that Quick Trigger, Henry Bolton and Slug Mi-

nor were arriving. He saw the plane then, flying scarcely two hundred feet in the air.

The Whisperer dodged into the heavy swamp grass, hid himself while Slug Minor began to circle for a landing in the smooth waters of the bay. While Slug was bringing the amphibian to rest, The Whisperer began to rip off black clothing. He made a compact bundle of the clothing, and in the center of the bundle, he hid the deadly supersilenced pistols. Then he hid the package, marking his hiding place and taking bearings on two tall trees.

When Slug taxied the plane up the small canal, Wildcat Gordon stood on the little dock. The only one of the three plane occupants who would think of asking Wildcat how he had gotten there was Bolton. Henry did so in his nasal voice as he stepped from the plane.

"It's about time you got here," Wildcat snapped. "I just called headquarters to find out what had happened to you."

Henry looked accusingly at Quick Trigger. It occurred to him that Quick had instructions from Wildcat that he didn't know about.

"Nobody tells me anything," he whined.

Slug Minor, stepping out behind him, snorted.

"Why should they, Henry? You wouldn't understand, anyway."

Bolton glared.

"What's going on here, anyway?" Quick Trigger boomed.

"That is what we are going to find out," Wildcat said. "Henry and Slug will guard the plane for the moment. Quick, you and I will investigate the house."

As Wildcat and Quick left the dock, the young commissioner noticed that both power boats were still there—the one in which The Whisperer and Asherton had come, and the speedboat with the marking of Matsimo & Co. It was the latter boat that no one had admitted using.

RICHARD TRAEGER

● Retired Deputy Traeger, known as old Quick Trigger, is Wildcat Gordon's most trusted friend. He, alone, knows the secret of The Whisperer, for it was old Quick who aided Wildcat in devising the ghostlike figure of the underworld who is the foe of crime.

As soon as they were away from the dock, Quick Trigger exploded.

"Tiny's missing, Wildcat. She got that message and went down to Chinatown. There hasn't been a trace of her since."

Wildcat Gordon began to blame himself for the plight of the girl

whose welfare meant a great deal more than he would have admitted to anyone.

"She isn't here," he rapped. "I don't think there has been a single boat or car arrive here since I sent that message."

"We have to find her," Quick Trigger moaned.

"We will," Wildcat said grimly. "We'll find her if I have to use thumb screws and the rack on every slant-eyed rat in this place."

They had reached the entrance to the big house by that time. There was a scurrying of feet inside. Tagoya Matsimo and Nuto Klee burst suddenly from the building. Matsimo stopped short when he saw Wildcat and Quick Trigger. A great tension seemed to leave his body.

"Iss fine," he said. "Iss wonderful you are here. Am much relieved."

Nuto Klee echoed the importer's sentiments. Wildcat Gordon's eyes were hard. He offered no information of any sort at the moment.

"What's been going on here?" he snapped.

"Iss plenty," Matsimo admitted. "And all iss bad."

In quick, hissing tones, Tagoya Matsimo outlined everything that had happened since The Whisperer had arrived at the estate. He also outlined the things he had told The Whisperer. And he didn't leave anything out. It appeared that Matsimo was either on the level and willingly co-operative or he was an accomplished actor and was telling all because he feared the information would get to Wildcat from other lips in any event.

Nuto Klee bobbed his skinny head up and down and plaintively agreed with everything that Matsimo had said.

"Someone came out here in Mr. Matsimo's boat," he complained. "It must have been the person who killed Mr. Nolting."

"Iss so," Matsimo cut in: "And the only strange persons we have seen are the tall white man and the Chinese girl. Maybe one of them iss the killer."

Wildcat Gordon's hard blue eyes bored into the two Orientals. There were reasons to doubt that either of these two men was responsible for what had happened. Tagoya Matsimo, even if he were not truly the man of peace and brotherhood that he had for years been known to be, would have had no reason to keep John Rourke Nolting alive—not if he were a patriot rather than a pacifist. And Nuto Klee, if he were acting as the renegade that he really was, would have had no reason for killing Nolting. Added to that was the fact that the two men were obviously working in harmony, toward some end that The Whisperer could not fathom.

"Where are the hatchet men you told me about?"

Matsimo shrugged.

"Come. We will see if we can find them."

Quick Trigger rumbled words of annoyance. He wanted to get on the trail of his daughter. And Wildcat was just as anxious as old Quick. But he realized that, as yet, there was no trail.

Matsimo led them through the house. The walls were marked by bullets. Slant-eyed gunmen lay on the floor of some of the rooms, their evil ways ended by the bullets of The Whisperer. Some of them were the scarred hatchet men of the Chinatown underworld. Others were the smaller men who had spoken in harsh

sibilance of Japan—the wild-eyed men to whom death seemed but an incident.

"How does it happen that these two types are working together?" Wildcat snapped. "And whom do they represent?"

Matsimo shrugged.

"Both iss strange to me," he insisted. "I cannot tell."

Nuto Klee laid claim to the same predicament.

Wildcat did not comment. His attention was diverted to other things. For at that moment, Slug Minor and Henry Bolton burst into the room. Both of them were breathless. And they were angry.

"I went into that swamp grass to investigate a rumpus there," Slug bellowed. "And this intellectual microbe let them get away."

Henry's face was crimson.

"I . . . I didn't see them," he protested. "They were in the boat and moving before I could do anything."

Wildcat Gordon jumped between the two men.

"Who?" he demanded. "Who got away in what boat?"

"Ming Lautoy and that blond guy," Slug rumbled. "And the blond guy was holding onto a yellow slant-eyed guy. They took the speedboat with the quarter cabin."

Wildcat's eyes hardened. He was certain that The Whisperer's boat would be the faster of the two speedboats that had been there. And Gregory Asherton had had plenty of opportunity to observe how it was operated on the trip from the Matsimo warehouse.

Henry Bolton's Adam's apple ran up and down like a cork on a string.

"I heard them talking," he offered. "The blond man smacked the yellow guy in the mouth and made him say something. Then he turned to the girl and said something about Fire Island."

Wildcat Gordon's eyes happened to be on Tagoya Matsimo when Henry offered his bit. The importer's little twinkling eyes suddenly went blank. He gulped, opened his mouth as if in panic. Then he shut it again and smiled, thoroughly in control.

"Iss interesting," he hissed. "Iss long strip of land. Whereabouts they go?"

Wildcat whirled around. Fire Island is indeed a long strip of land. It is thirty miles from one end of Fire Island to Moriches. And most of that stretch is less than a mile in width. The strip is separated from the main shore of Long Island by Great South Bay, an expanse of water that ranges in width from half a dozen miles to a narrow channel at Smith Point, near Moriches.

"The plane," he snapped. "We can follow them from the air!"

Slug Minor bellowed in assent. He rushed out to kick the motor into life and warm it up for a take-off. Wildcat turned back to Tagoya Matsimo. The importer was looking wildly around as if he had lost something.

"Klee! Nuto Klee! Where iss he?" Matsimo gobbled.

Wildcat's eyes narrowed.

"That's your problem," he snapped. "The amphibian will only hold three persons."

He stamped out, followed by Quick Trigger. Henry Bolton looked vastly pleased with himself for having furnished some information of value, even if he didn't have any idea why it was of such great importance. He was instructed to stay at the Matsimo estate and to contact the State police. Officially, of course, Wildcat Gordon had no jurisdiction at all out here in Suffolk County.

Wildcat dived across the dock, a Police Positive barking in one hand. Quick Trigger fired a submachine gun from the amphibian's cabin, forcing the yellow men back into the swamp grass and covering Wildcat's dash to the plane.

CHAPTER IX.

PURSUIT IN THE FOG!

Wildcat told Quick Trigger to help Slug turn the plane around so she could roar straight out of the little canal for a quick take-off. The young commissioner left Quick for a moment or two. He strode through the high swamp grass to the place where he had hidden the black garb of The Whisperer. For Wildcat was

sure that he would have to call on the black-clad mystery man of the underworld before this thing was over.

There was no place that was out of the jurisdiction of The Whisperer. Wildcat laughed shortly as he picked up the bundle and turned back to the little dock where the amphibian was moored.

Slug did not notice the bundle. Other difficulties intervened to occupy his attention. Crime made one more attempt to prevent Wildcat Gordon from pursuing the mystery of John Rourke Nolting's murder. Some ears had no doubt overheard the plan of Wildcat to follow Gregory Asherton and the pretty Ming Lautoy. Slant-eyed killers material-

ized suddenly from the swamp grass, and submachine guns cut loose with short bursts of lead.

Wildcat Gordon barked quick orders. He dived across the small dock, a Police Positive barking in one hand. Quick Trigger leaned out of a window of the amphibian's cabin, triggering the release of a submachine gun himself. Quick's fire forced the yellow men back into the swamp grass and covered Wildcat's dash to the plane. He noticed then that *both* of the speedboats were gone.

Wildcat got to the plane and Slug opened the throttle. The trim ship leaped ahead as the yellow men ran out of the swamp grass and made one more attempt to stop the plane. The amphibian was equipped with the newest self-sealing gas tanks, and the cabin, itself, was built to deflect shots.

The ship roared out onto the bay and took the air without further mishap.

"What direction?" Slug Minor asked quickly.

"Just get altitude," Wildcat instructed. "Then I'll tell you what course to set."

Slug Minor circled. Wildcat Gordon glued his eyes to a powerful pair of binoculars and looked down at the flat surface of the bay, seeking twin plumes of water that he was sure he would be able to identify. A peculiarity of the hull construction of The Whisperer's speedboat made it easily identifiable from a great distance, if her motors were really turning over.

Wildcat thought he saw it. Then a milky whiteness obscured everything. It was as if they had dived into a great wad of cotton batting.

"Fog!" Slug grunted. "It's been smelling like it. Now, here it is, coming down fast."

Wildcat looked at the altimeter. They were up a little less than a thousand feet.

"Come down lower," Wildcat snapped. "Get down to four hundred and head a hundred and twenty degrees magnetic."

Slug shoved the stick ahead, nosed down out of the white stuff.

At five hundred feet, Wildcat could see again. He picked up the binoculars and stared through them. Five miles away, between West Island and Saltaire, he saw twin spouts of spray that looked familiar. As he watched, the spray turned into the channel that led to Ocean Beach two miles beyond.

The swift amphibian bore through the air at four hundred feet, rapidly closing the gap between them and the speedboat down below. They overhauled the boat before she got to Ocean Beach. As Slug circled, for a landing, Quick grunted to Wildcat.

"There's another boat following her. I've been watching it."

He pointed astern. Wildcat told Slug to swing wide and get down low enough to investigate this one. He was satisfied that the leading boat was the one carrying Gregory Asherton and Ming Lautoy.

Slug circled over the second boat. But the man at the wheel had a sou'wester hat pulled well down over his eyes. Oilskins were buttoned tightly about his neck. It was impossible to tell what he looked like.

Slug swung then, with the intention of making a landing far enough ahead of the leading boat to taxi back and cut it off. By now, the boat was well beyond Ocean Beach, taking a course that would carry her well past any of the summer resorts on Fire

Island; a course that seemed to be bringing her only into a waste of sand and beach grass.

Wildcat remarked on that odd circumstance. Quick Trigger thought that it would be better not to intercept the boat, now.

"If we let her run, we'll be able to follow her where she's going," he insisted. "But if we stop them now, they might not tell us anything in time to—"

Quick coughed and cleared his throat.

"In time to save Tiny from harm," Wildcat finished softly. "Maybe it's worth while."

A yell from Slug Minor interrupted him.

"We haven't got time for anything," he bellowed. "It's all soup from here out."

The plane had been cruising in an easterly direction. It bored straight into the rolling bank of fog. Everything was obliterated. It was if a blanket of soapsuds had been dumped suddenly on the water. It was a typical easterly fog, the kind of heavy fog that seems to have a substance that can be grasped; a thing almost capable of creating impact when it is pierced.

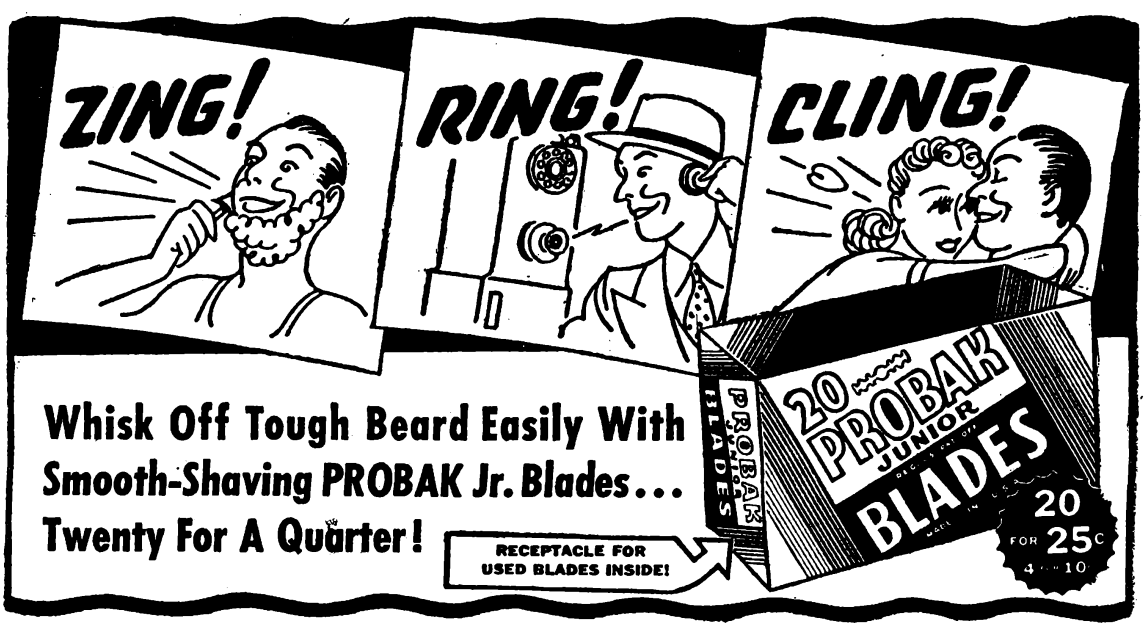
Slug Minor cursed. He dropped the plane until the pontoons were skidding along the waves. The three men strained their eyes, hoping for a rift in the white stuff. But when an easterly fog sets on Great South Bay, it is usually good for two or three days. Wildcat Gordon was well aware of that.

Suddenly he yelled, grabbed the stick away from Slug and pulled it sharply back. With the plane scudding not three feet above the surface, a clam digger's boat loomed suddenly ahead. Wildcat's sharp eyes had seen it a fraction of a second before Slug had. That fraction of a second made the difference between a bad crack-up and the foot or so of white fog that separated the amphibian's hull and the mast of the boat.

Slug wiped sweat from his brow. He took the plane up to two hundred on the altimeter.

"What're we going to do now?" he wanted to know.

The plane itself answered him. The motor sputtered a couple of



times, missed fire and then stopped. At that low altitude in a cross wind, the ship staggered, nose-heavy. It was all Slug could do to bring her down right side up in the chop of the bay.

"Damn!" Slug grunted. "It doesn't seem possible, but it sounds as if we're out of gas."

He ripped open an access hatch to the wing tanks and peered inside. Then he sniffed disgustedly and looked around at Wildcat.

"Guess we're here to stay," he rumbled. "One of their slugs nicked the fuel line. No self-sealing tanks can help a bad break like that."

Wildcat Gordon held up one hand, He opened two windows.

"Listen," he said.

The muffled pur of high-speed motors droned through the fog. Wildcat did not say so, but he was trying to identify the motors of The Whisperer's boat by their sound. And he was trying to judge the distance and direction.

Recognizing his own motors was not difficult, but ascertaining direction over water in a fog is quite another matter. Wildcat climbed out on one wing of the amphibian. Quick Trigger crouched beside him. For a few seconds the drone of motors seemed to be coming from one direction; then they would seem to shift.

The crippled amphibian drifted with tide and winds as Wildcat and Quick Trigger strained their ears. Suddenly, the drone of marine motors slackened and choked into silence. In that moment, Wildcat made a quick check of wind-drift direction and tried to mentally triangulate the direction of that motor when it stopped. He leaped back into the cabin and checked a compass and a chart of Great South Bay. He put his finger on a part of the slim ribbon of sand indicated on the chart.

"The hurricane of 1938 washed an inlet through there," Wildcat said. "It is not supposed to be navigable. But I think it is where that speedboat stopped."

Quick Trigger grunted. Wildcat hadn't given him any specific instructions. Quick didn't need any. He was tugging at a grayish mass of rubber that looked like a tangle of oversized inner tubes. This was a collapsible pneumatic lifeboat. Meanwhile, Slug Minor was throwing out a light anchor that would hold the amphibian to the sandy bottom of the bay. Quick Trigger got out a bicycle pump and started to inflate the rubber boat.

"Why in tarnation would anyone want to go to a desolate place like that?" he rumbled. "There isn't anything worth fifty cents on that whole stretch of the beach."

Wildcat Gordon was busy taking guns and equipment from the cabin of the plane. The rough bundle containing the clothing of the Whisperer he had wrapped in a piece of light canvas.

"There used to be an old summer hotel about at that point," he said. "It is just possible that some of it is still standing and that these yellow babies are using it as a hideout."

Quick Trigger wasn't satisfied.

"But why?" he insisted. "It's a hell of a place to get to. And there isn't anything there when you do reach it."

Wildcat Gordon didn't answer. If he had any theories at all, he apparently wasn't ready to announce them.

"I think we may find Tiny there, Quick," he said shortly. "We will find something that is important. That much is certain."

Quick grunted in agreement, slid the now-inflated rubber boat into the water.

"That's right," he agreed. "Those babies tried hard enough to stop us after you said we were going to Fire Island."

The three men got into the rubber boat. Slug and Wildcat rowed with short paddle. Quick held a compass, directing them in a southerly course that was bound to bring them to the shore of Fire Island. The fog was so thick that visibility was limited to less than twenty feet.

Slug bemoaned the luck that brought a steel-jacketed machine-gun bullet through that narrow gas line when the slant-eyed gunmen tried to stop them from going to Fire Island.

"Our decision to go to Fire Island brought two other developments," Wildcat said quietly. "Both of them lead me to believe that we will find our answers over here."

Slug and Quick both looked at him.

"Tagoya Matsimo was all upset by it," Wildcat reminded them. "And Nuto Klee disappeared immediately."

Quick grunted; he looked repeatedly at his compass. The tide and wind were both helping them. They made better time than Wildcat had anticipated. By midafternoon the water was so shallow that rowing was difficult. Then they grounded gently on the sand. Wildcat dragged the rubber boat up beyond the high-tide mark, and the three men set out, walking eastward on the sand.

Quick Trigger, in the lead, let out a yell. Wind-driven fog swirled around two dark objects ahead of them. Slug and Wildcat rushed up beside old Quick. Two speedboats were beached a dozen feet apart. One of them was The Whisperer's quarter-cabined job. The other bore the name of Matsimo & Co. and was the one that had disappeared at the same time Nuto Klee vanished from the big house on Long Island!

Wildcat held up one hand for silence. The three men stood motionless, listening. There was only the lapping of the calm bay water at their feet, the booming of the surf

SLUG MINOR

● Wildcat Gordon's untiring effort once saved Slug Minor, then a water-front roustabout, from a framed robbery charge. The giant Slug has since endeavored to repay the commissioner's complete faith in his role as Wildcat's chauffeur and strong-arm aid.

half a mile or more away on the other side of the long, narrow island and the sighing of the wind. Wet fog swirled like ghostly fingers, gently clutching everything that it touched. Quick Trigger looked uncomfortable.

"Jehoshaphat!" he whispered. "I shouldn't have yelled like that."

Wildcat stared ahead, as if trying to penetrate the milky translucence of the fog.

"The surf may have drowned it out," he said. "But we better spread out. You take the bay beach, Slug. Quick, you take the center ridge. I'll take the ocean side. If either of you gets into trouble, fire two quick shots."

Silently, the three friends parted. The fog swallowed each of them; each walked in a milky pocket of swirling whiteness.

CHAPTER X.

THE WHISPERER REAPPEARS.

Wildcat's strategy in separating was sound. Cut off by the blanket of fog, one of them might be surprised and captured. But if he fired the warning shots to let the others know, it was unlikely that all of them would be overcome. At least one would be able to escape to get help or to rescue his companions.

Wildcat Gordon's feet sank into the smooth wet sand of the ocean beach. Surf thundered to within a few yards of the route he chose. He could see nothing at all and could hear nothing against the rumble of the great waves that pounded the Fire Island shore.

He forged rapidly through the chill mist. There wasn't a single other footprint on the wide expanse of sand. It was as if he were on a desert island, hundreds of miles from any human habitation. There is no place more lonesome in a fog than some of the long stretches of uninhabited Fire Island, less than fifty miles from the heart of busy Manhattan.

Then he heard the shots! They came when there was a momentary lull in the pounding of the surf, two of them in quick succession. Wildcat turned and raced along the softer, drier sand of the center ridge of the island. He plowed straight toward the sound of those shots. Then another sound, a bellowing roar of rage and anger came to his ears.

Slug Minor had gone into action at close quarters. Wildcat could hear Slug's huge fists smashing into flesh and bone. Somehow his assailants must have gotten his gun away from him. Suddenly, voices seemed to surround Wildcat. They gobbled in shrill sibilance. Slug's bellowing voice yelled out.

"One of the yellow rats threw a knife, and got my gun wrist," he bellowed. "There's about ten of them on me, now! Quick, keep yourself clear."

Quick Trigger's voice rumbled out a tale as dire as Slug's.

"They got me, dang it. I didn't even see them in the fog. They came up from behind."

Wildcat dropped flat in the sand. Beach grass abounded in short clumps. The young commissioner rolled into the depression of a wind-created ridge. The wind was stronger, now. The fog swirled; it lifted momentarily, and Wildcat could see a hundred feet or more. He saw Slug Minor. The barrel-chested cop was bound by a tight rope at the wrists. He was surrounded by yellow, slant-eyed men who looked like pygmies beside his gargantuan bulk.

Quick Trigger was also tied. And spraddle-legged before him was a one-eyed man whom Wildcat had not

seen before. It was the same ugly white man who had handled the false junk boat that had carried Charley Lautoy, Johnny Sing Wong and Tiny Traeger from Manhattan.

He slashed an open hand across the gaunt deputy's mouth.

"Where is he?" the one-eyed man grated. "We know that snoopy Gordon came with you. And we want him."

Quick Trigger's voice rose to an angry bellow. It was much louder than necessary under the circumstances.

"He went to get help, you one-eyed rat," Quick shouted. "He went away in a rubber boat we had. He's out on the bay somewhere!"

Wildcat Gordon knew that Quick was shouting for his benefit. Quick was trying to tell him that the odds were too great for him to tackle alone; that he had better go for more assistance. Wildcat's lips were tightly compressed. He rolled quietly until he was again hidden by the swirling fog. As he rose to his feet and began to run back toward the spot of bay beach where they had beached the boat, he heard the one-eyed man give orders.

"Search the beach. If he's here, we'll find him."

Wildcat's legs pounded down the beach, passing the two speedboats. If he were really going for help, he certainly would have taken one of those.

But Wildcat Gordon feared that if he went for help, his friends would be killed long before he could return. These killers were desperate. That was obvious. And something important enough to create that desperation lay behind this plot.

Wildcat grated angry words into the fog. He reached the rubber boat and shoved out into the water of the bay. He paddled rapidly into the swirling mists. The sand of the beach would show one more set of footprints leading to the boat than led away from it. That should convince the one-eyed man that Quick Trigger had told the truth.

Wildcat paddled the boat a hundred yards or more to the west. He took it ashore again then. But before it touched the sand, he opened the valve that controlled the air. The thing deflated into a compact bundle. Wildcat held the canvas-wrapped package of The Whisperer's clothing under one arm. With the other arm, he hurled the collapsed rubber boat across the strip of beach. It landed in a large clump of poison ivy and dropped from sight behind the three-leaved vines. Fire Island is full of poison ivy, and curious souls are not likely to go poking into it.

Wildcat stood there for several moments, ankle-deep in the water. Then he backed out farther into the shallow bay. He heard the grating voice of the one-eyed man.

"Here's where the boat was," he growled. "They must have had a collapsible boat on the plane."

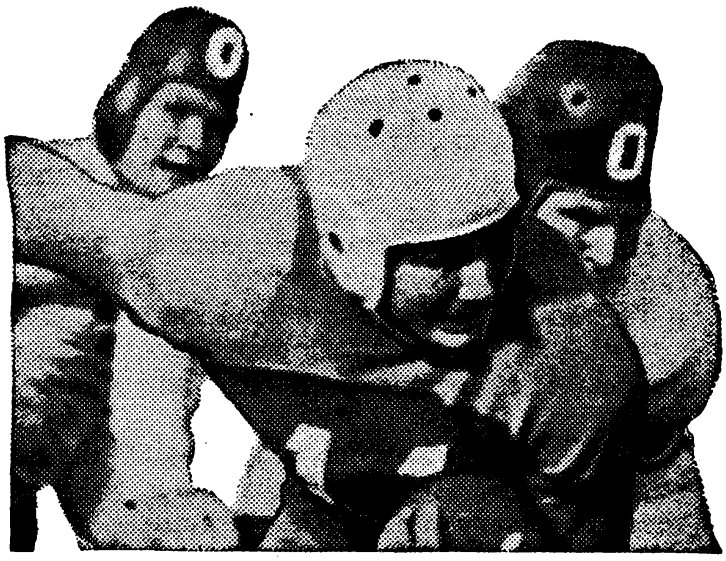
He commented on the fact that there was one more footprint leading into the boat than away from it.

"The old geezer must have told the truth," he grunted. "But we'll search the beach both ways to be sure he didn't come back in again."

The yellow men were sent in both directions. From where he stood in the water, Wildcat could dimly see one of them dart along the section of beach opposite him. The Oriental didn't think to glance at the poison ivy. And there was no mark on the sand. Wildcat had hurled the collapsed boat over the sand.

Presently, One-eye announced himself satisfied. He recalled the

FLASH!



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men who were checking on the beach. The whole party drifted eastward, toward the spot where Wildcat had recalled there had once been a summer hotel. The young commissioner waited until they were well out of earshot. Then he retraced his steps to the sandy shore. He walked through the sand, found a leafy branch that wasn't poison ivy and carefully brushed out his footprints.

The canvas bundle yielded black clothing, odd dental plates and supersilenced pistols. Wildcat Gordon ceased to exist for the moment. Green contact lenses covered the cold blue eyes and a chilling whisper matched the eeriness of the swirling fog.

The long arm of justice, which claimed jurisdiction wherever crime stalked, moved wraithlike through the fog, an avenging blur in the dimness.

He stopped by the two power boats, inspecting both his own, which had been appropriated by Ming Lautoy and Asherton, and the Matsimo-owned boat. Then The Whisperer turned toward the ocean.

He had seen One-eye and the yellow-skinned killers take Quick Trigger and Slug Minor eastward on the bay side of the narrow sand spit that is Fire Island. It was probable that watchers would be stationed on the backtrail.

So he returned to the ocean front. The boom of the surf was as ominous as it had been before. Fog still swirled around the bunches of beach grass and low-clumped brush of the sanddunes. But the wind was a little brisker, now. The fog swirled in longer, more tangible streaks. Visibility extended two or three hundred yards at times, only to shut down to a matter of feet in the intervals of comparative calm.

Suddenly, The Whisperer came to the brink of what seemed to be a fast-flowing stream. He mentally checked the time of day and the tide as it had been flowing when he and Gregory Asherton had come into Jones Inlet and through the inside channel to Great South Bay. Then he knew that this was the rapidly ebbing tide, flowing through the new inlet that had been cut by the hurricane. He turned left.

He followed closely the bank of that inlet, dodging sinkholes of treacherously soft sand, climbing over gaunt timbers that had once been trees, hurled down by the mighty tidal wave that had laid waste great sections of this coast line.

As he walked, a strange thumping sound pulsed through the fog. It was as if a gigantic plunger were compressing great quantities of air. The Whisperer paused, looking around. Close inshore, in the swirling waters of the inlet, which he knew was too shallow for navigation, he saw a series of low, dingy shacks. They looked not unlike some fish wharfs along the New England coast. A heavy Diesel engine was thumping there. The Whisperer thought that it might have been a power plant to furnish electric current to whatever sort of a headquarters was hidden on this lonely sand spit.

He considered breasting the swirling tidal waters to investigate the shacks. But at that moment, he saw in the gathering dusk, the gaunt remains of the ancient hotel that he believed would prove to be the real headquarters. It stood there, huge and passively menacing in the swirling whiteness of the fog. It was many yards back from the recently formed inlet. The Whisperer left the water and moved silently toward the skeletal hulk that had once been

the summer rendezvous of many celebrities and the sportive crowd of the Gay '90s.*

The Whisperer did not go directly to the old structure. Part of the lower floor was buried, now. In time, the blowing sand, thrust up by wind and surf, would bury it all, making a gaunt tomb of memories of the whole place. The Whisperer crept to one half-wrecked outbuilding that had been the old laundry. An ancient horizontal-boilered steam engine still stood there. And from there, The Whisperer heard a groan.

Instantly tense, he followed that sound until it took him to a rustled grating that had once been part of the firebox of that old engine. Compact, steellike, hands ripped the grating loose, and The Whisperer plunged into a narrow tunnel that had been built to house the steam and water pipes which led to the main structure.

That tunnel gave onto a cellar that had once lain buried in the hungry sands, but had been partly excavated. The marks of recent excavation were plain in the cavelike interior.

A husky whisper of surprise came from the lips of the wraithlike enemy of crime as he slid into the cellar. His pencil flash clicked on, and a pale, narrow beam of light stabbed the darkness. The whisper of surprise changed to an angry, hissing note of hate and vengeance.

One of the closest friends of The Whisperer was there. He was lying helpless, tied, his clothing in bloody ribbons. Charles Lee Lautoy, master of the Golden Tree Tong, turned tortured eyes toward The Whisperer.

But beneath those eyes, his lips smiled hopefully. Charles Lautoy recognized that whisper of surprise and anger.

"One who whispers, welcome," Lautoy murmured. "My prayers have been answered more completely than I had really hoped."

The Whisperer bent quickly down and untied the bonds that held the old Manchu. He straightened Charley Lautoy and leaned him as comfortably as he could against the masonry wall.

"Tell me, father of tongs," The Whisperer said in Cantonese. "What has gone by. What is it that the evil ones are seeking."

The old man's eyes probed The Whisperer.

"They seek my daughter and the daughter of our friend, Quick Trigger. They seek them so that they can control you and me to keep us from uncovering their plans."

"And their plans?"

"To steal and destroy a means of making China strong; a means of turning eternal famine into vitality that will rise and strike her enemies. They do not wish the rights of common man to become supreme in Asia."

Charley Lautoy's eyes glowed with a strange fire as he spoke. But the effort was great, indeed. He slumped back weakly, closing his eyes in pain. The Whisperer made him as comfortable as he could. He put the bonds back loosely on the old man's wrists and ankles.

"It is better that they find you still tied than that they take vengeance upon you for getting free," he husked. "If it can avail anyone for you to shake these loose bonds, you will hear my voice. Now, tell me, if you can, where are Tiny Traeger and your daughter?"

The old man shook his head.

"I do not know," he said softly.

* There were three famed hotels on Fire Island about which this background is accurate, though little known. The old steamboats that sailed the Hudson River used to come out into Great South Bay to bring the Broadway crowd to these hotels.—Ed.

The Whisperer pressed one hand against the tong leader's brow. Then he padded off into the darkness. Another ancient tunnel, half filled with sand, led in the direction of the old hotel's main building. Down that, The Whisperer made his way. Torches guttered here, showing locked wooden doors to chambers that probably had been storerooms for vegetables and wines during the glittering days of the hotel's activity.

A sharp turn in the corridor brought The Whisperer to a door that was apparently the barrier to a chamber of particular importance. Two oval-faced yellow men in short kimonos stood outside of the door, expressions of belligerence on their faces. Their arms were folded and they stood back to back.

The Whisperer surmised that there must be something in that subterranean chamber that was important to him. These yellow men were not Chinese. Of that, he was certain. And he did not know the language of these two. Not knowing it, he could not use their tongue to perpetrate a ruse.

So, with a whispering cry of warning, the black-clad battler swept out into that twisted corridor, supersilenced pistols in his hands.

"Aiyie! Aiyie!

The two slant-eyed guards swung into action. The nearest one whipped out a flat automatic. The Whisperer shot it from his hand. That was not too difficult. The long arm of justice was poised, ready for the fray before the yellow men even saw him. A second shot from the supersilenced weapons swung the other Oriental around, blood streaming from a shoulder wound.

The Whisperer was upon them then. Slim fingers found skinny, Oriental necks. The thumbs of the black-clad scrapper found the proper nerve centers at the bases of their brains, and the two guards slumped to the damp floor, unconscious.

A key, taken from one of the guards, fitted a lock that was strangely modern for such an old establishment. The lock was well oiled and nearly noiseless as the key turned. Then The Whisperer swung the door back and stepped inside.

A chair descended from the darkness, smashing against his skull. He staggered and whirled around. Then, in the dimness of the guttering torch in the outside corridor, recognition was mutual. Tiny Traeger and The Whisperer stared at each other.

Tiny sagged. A sigh of relief escaped her lips. A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. Then she stiffened. A blaze of anger came into her gray-blue eyes.

"You let those men capture dad and Slug Minor," she said in her rich, low voice. "I heard the men talking about it!"

The Whisperer chuckled softly. His green eyes stared at the girl.

"I let them do it? *The Whisperer* did that?"

The long arm of justice did not want Tiny Traeger to be sure of his double identity. Possession of such information would be a very dangerous thing to have. It might cause operators of the underworld to war on the girl; to torture her to find out how much more she might possibly have learned.

The Whisperer advanced slowly toward Tiny.

Tiny Traeger faltered. There was an expression of bewilderment in her eyes. A moment before, she had been sure of herself. Now, doubt assailed her. She put one hand to her mouth, shook her head.

"I . . . I thought—" she gasped.

Then she plunged suddenly toward the door.

"They're going to torture my father," she blurted. "I'm going to stop them, somehow."

A whispering chuckle filled the room. Tiny was a scrapper. She had inherited it. The black-clad crime foe caught her before she reached the door and held her in a viselike grip.

"You will only invite disaster for us all. You and your father will both be safer if you remain where you are. I will try to help your father. Tell me what you know." The words whipped out like bursts of steam. The Whisperer leaned close to the girl. "The life of your father and the lives of many others may be at stake. Talk, if there is anything you can say to help!"

Tiny Traeger's eyes grew wide. In that tense moment, the assurance that she knew the identity of the mysterious fighter of the underworld seemed to drop from her. But she hesitated only a fraction of a second. Words rushed from her lips.

"I heard the one called Po talk," she confided. "He thought that I was unconscious when they put me in this room. Po is short and squat with his head twisted oddly on one side. You will recognize him. He is in charge of this thing at present. But someone whom I don't know is over him."

"What is their objective?" The Whisperer husked.

"They seek to destroy a specific formula which will eliminate the vitamin B1 deficiency that causes beriberi among rice eaters. It will also vitalize the rice grown even in arid, impoverished land to the point that it becomes a complete, energizing diet." Tiny paused, her eyes wide. "Its possibilities are tremendous. China will be like a sleeping giant come alive. But these men are fanatics. They don't want the thing for themselves; they want to destroy all knowledge of it. And the one man who has the formula, who knows definitely that it exists, is on his way here!"

Tiny was panting when she finished. The thing had captured her imagination. For the moment, she forgot her own plight and the danger to her father. She put one hand on the forearm of The Whisperer.

"They mustn't do it," she said softly. "They mustn't destroy a thing that means that much to humanity. Let me help you. I'll do anything you tell me."

The Whisperer's green eyes glowed in the darkness that was broken only by the pale beam of his pencil flash. He weighed the possibilities. If the yellow-faced killers discovered that Tiny's guards had been overpowered, they might murder the girl to prevent her from telling anything that she might know. On the other hand, The Whisperer felt that she was almost sure to stop a bullet if she followed him.

"Come," he said. "I have a job that you can do."

He locked the unconscious guards in the prison chamber, then led Tiny back to the cellar where Charley Lautoy lay. Tiny Traeger cried out in anguish when she saw his wounds.

"The one called Po did that," she told The Whisperer.

"Po has much to answer for," The Whisperer husked.

He bade Tiny help him carry the half-conscious form of the Manchu chief into the steel firebox of the old boiler. The Whisperer shoved Tiny in beside the tong leader. Then he replaced the grating. He reached under his black clothing and grasped one of Wildcat Gordon's

Police Positives. He handed the gun to the girl.

"This is not a difficult place to defend," he said. "You are responsible for Charley Lautoy as well as for yourself."

With that, he left her. He hoped that her affection for the old tong leader would keep her from straying into trouble. The Whisperer retraced his steps down the passageway, extinguishing each torch he reached.

The black-clad battler of the underworld preferred darkness in which to come to grips with these enemies of humanity.

CHAPTER XI.

UNMASKED!

As he padded through the darkness, extinguishing one torch after another, The Whisperer wondered again about that thumping noise of a Diesel out in the waters of the shallow inlet. He had not yet found any indication that electric power was being used in this ancient and abandoned hostelry.

Then he struck stone steps—steps that had been well worn from the tread of many feet long before the old hotel had been discarded. They went upward, The Whisperer followed them. A door at the head of that flight of stairs gave when he pressed against it.

The hallway into which he stepped then was no dank, moldy corridor of stone. It was smartly paneled with hardwood and heavily carpeted. Fluorescent tubes of the most modern design cast a light akin to the natural illumination of daytime. At the farther end of the corridor, there was another door of polished wood with a gleaming, chrome-steel knob.

The Whisperer repressed a chuckle. He crouched as he moved. There were square windows set into the paneling, permitting a view of other chambers that were apparently entered by sliding doors. They were trimly modern rooms, with a strange mixture of tube steel modernistic furnishings and the rich decorations of the Orient.

The first three rooms that the crime foe passed were empty. The fourth was occupied by several figures. Behind a wide, flat-topped desk, sat a wiry, shock-haired and slant-eyed man. Only one thing detracted from an otherwise military figure. That was the grotesque angle of his twisted head. This, The Whisperer knew instantly, was Po, the one who had flogged Charley Lautoy.

Po was obviously in command in the big room. Two kimonoed attendants stood beside him, handing him cigarettes, matches, a fountain pen. Also flanking Po were half a dozen guards armed with short rifles.

The Whisperer could not hear words through the heavy glass. But there was an ugly sneer on Po's lips, and he shook a menacing finger at two figures who sat before him.

One of them was the tall, blond Gregory Asherton. He lolled back in a modernistic chair, his eyes on the ceiling, seeming totally uninterested in what Po had to say. He was either showing contempt under circumstances of greatest danger, or he had an ace in the hole with which he could protect himself.

The Whisperer recalled what Tiny Traeger had said about the man in possession of the formula being on his way to this hide-out. Whatever man had that formula, if he had it hidden where it would come to light if he were harmed, would be able to control Po without difficulty!

And The Whisperer thought of another angle as he noticed the fig-

ure in the other chair before the desk of Po. If Gregory Asherton was the possessor of a secret that would arouse and energize a sleeping China, who would be a better contact to *sell* the secret than Charley Lee Lautoy? It wasn't the tong leader who sat in the other chair. But it was Ming Lautoy! The pretty face of the Chinese girl was entirely expressionless. If she fully realized the extent to which the fate of her countrymen was involved in this thing, she gave no indication of it.

The gaze of The Whisperer shifted from Ming Lautoy then. A low chuckle escaped his lips. There was another familiar figure in that room. Bound and gagged, writhing on the floor in futile attempt to get away, was Nuto Klee. Dark emotions livened the half-caste's eyes.

At that moment, Po shot a quick glance toward the square window through which The Whisperer was looking. The black-clad fighter ducked quickly; he scurried farther along the passageway. With six armed guards in the big room, plus Po, and not knowing the true role of Gregory Asherton, The Whisperer did not desire to perpetrate a frontal attack at the moment. Somewhere in this place, Quick Trigger and Slug Minor were prisoners, as well. And there was another deadly foe in One-eye, the burly white man who had superintended the capture of Slug and Quick.

Also, The Whisperer did not believe that this headquarters had been brought into existence solely because of that one formula. The whole place had an atmosphere of permanency about it that The Whisperer did not like.

A sound of a key grating in the lock of the door at the end of the corridor galvanized him into action. He sprang to a sliding portal on the opposite side of the passageway from the one leading into the room where Po was holding court. The sliding panel gave and the long arm of justice shot through it, closing the door behind him.

Low lights illuminated the room in which he found himself. And they explained some of the purpose of this evil hangout. There were maps on the walls. One of them showed every reservoir and water works serving the entire area of metropolitan New York. Another had red circles around the defense factories of Connecticut and other New England manufacturing centers. Brooklyn Navy Yard came in for special attention, with appended notes giving the location of powder magazines and other munitions store houses.

Against one wall, there was an elaborate short-wave radio, equipped for both voice and code. The operator's chair was vacant, now. But the presence of a half-scribbled message on a pad and the casual manner in which the chair had been pushed back, convinced The Whisperer that the radio man for this deadly nest of espionage and sabotage would return shortly.

With a hissing cry of defiance, the black-clad figure sprang to that vacant chair, pulled it close to the transmitting panel. The operator had left the current on and the transmitter jacks in place, The Whisperer adjusted dials to the wave length of the nearest State police barracks. He called them three times and finally got an answer.

He revealed that he was The Whisperer, then told them what he had found and where it was.

"I have information that Deputy Bolton and a detachment of your men are between Babylon and Bay

Shore on Long Island," the husky voice intoned. "Contact them. Get them with reinforcements to Fire Island. You may not hear from me again. There is no—"

A snarling curse rasped out from behind The Whisperer. He dropped the transmitting microphone and whirled to meet a new foe. The man was another kimonoed Oriental. He hissed like a striking snake and sprang silently across the floor, a queer, daggerlike knife in one hand. The man was launched in his dive even before The Whisperer had turned.

With a short, husky laugh, the long arm of justice doubled low, catching the hurtling body on one shoulder. He twisted then, slashing one fist straight into the windpipe of the man. It was a blow that had originated in the slant-eyed killer's country. The attacker choked, strangling, his throat muscles painfully paralyzed. He clawed frantically at his windpipe.

The Whisperer raised one supersilenced pistol then, and slashed downward across the killer's skull. He didn't want any undue noise until he was ready to strike.

He backed toward the door of the room, thinking as he did, that Nuto Klee should provide a key to certain answers that he needed. Nuto must know things that were dangerous to the spies or there would be no reason for his being bound and gagged.

With a whispering message of death and defiance, the crime fighter raised his two supersilenced guns and spewed blue flame and lead into the elaborate operating panel of the radio transmitter. The first shot split the bakelite. Another struck an oscillating tube. The tube screamed angrily. Acrid smoke mushroomed up from the set. At the same instant, The Whisperer began to yell. He was ready to bring excited yellow men down upon this room in hordes.

Two final shots were his last offensive act. They followed one another into a light socket. A crackling explosion was followed by a blown-out fuse. The Whisperer stood in darkness. Quietly, he slid back the door and glided into the corridor which was now also dark.

Sharp, sibilant voices cried out in the big room where Po had been. A large flashlight was sweeping back and forth. Po was hurtling toward the door to the corridor. Behind him, the armed guards herded Ming Lautoy and Asherton along in Po's wake. The Whisperer flattened against the dark wall of the corridor, becoming a darker patch of blackness.

The sliding door of the big room snapped open and Po's flashlight cut the darkness. It centered on the open door of the radio room. Po cursed in his native tongue. The Whisperer could not understand the words. But that Po was cursing, there could be little doubt. The afflicted Oriental plunged into the radio room. His armed guards followed, shoving Asherton and Ming Lautoy before them.

With an almost inaudible whisper, the black figure that was still part of the darkness padded silently across the floor of the big room that Po had left. He found Nuto Klee still writhing on the floor. Klee stopped struggling when he heard the sharp whisper in the darkness. The crime foe leaned over, whipping out a small knife. He slashed the bonds at Klee's ankles and jerked him to his feet; but he did not untie the bonds at his wrists or remove the gag from his mouth.

The Whisperer wanted information from Nuto Klee. But he was by

no means ready to trust the half-caste.

He began leading the renegade toward a door he had noticed in the opposite wall of the big room. A familiar voice, back in the corridor by the radio compartment, arrested him.

"Iss The Whisperer, Po. Iss the same stunt he pulled at the other place. We must stop him."

Tagoya Matsimo!

There was no question about that voice in the darkness. The Whisperer quickened his pace.

"Follow me," he husked to Nuto Klee. He slashed the bonds that confined the half-caste's wrists. Things were moving rapidly to a conclusion, and he had to take a chance.

"Keep one hand on my shoulder," he whispered. "I will try to find the other door. We must get outside where we will be clear."

The Whisperer moved through the blackness, trying to orient himself by sounds. He did find the other door in the wall and discovered that it was not locked. A short, gloom-filled hall led outside.

It was nearly dark by that time. The fog had thinned considerably and the easterly wind was brisk. The Whisperer turned to see if there was sufficient visibility to see the lights of Long Island, but there was not.

Nuto Klee was struggling with the gag between his teeth. He freed it.

"Th-they'll be after us," he said plaintively.

The Whisperer thought of the shacklike row of buildings in the swirling waters of the inlet. He decided to head for those. They might offer a good hiding place. Besides, that thumping Diesel still pricked his curiosity.

"Come on," he husked to Nuto Klee. "And while we run, tell me what you know."

They ran quietly through the soft, yielding sand. At first, Nuto Klee complained that he didn't really know anything. The Whisperer whirled around and gripped the half-caste by the collar.

"We will return then," he said. "I am sure that Tagoya Matsimo would be as glad to see you as he would The Whisperer."

Nuto Klee shuddered and fell to his knees.

"No! No! I'll talk. Matsimo is in charge of all east coast espionage for his country. He killed John Rourke Nolting to destroy the formula that might have saved China."

"Why would he torture Nolting instead of killing him immediately?" The Whisperer demanded.

Nuto Klee shrugged.

"Perhaps he wanted to know if anyone else knew of the formula," he suggested. "Maybe he wanted to find out if anyone else must be killed to make sure that the formula was out of the way."

Once started, Nuto Klee talked glibly. Perhaps, The Whisperer suspected, too glibly. But at the edge of the chill water of the inlet, Klee stopped talking. He looked fearfully at the swirling tidal current. There was fear on his face.

"I don't want to—" he began.

The Whisperer seized the half-caste's arm with steely fingers and flung him into the water. It was only waste deep. The two men floundered out to the low dock by one of the shacks. The pounding of the Diesel was louder now. It was like being in the engine room of a cruise ship. The Whisperer sat beside Nuto Klee for a moment. He was frowning.

"Someone does know about that formula," he said huskily. "In fact, someone has it. Who?"

"Maybe Asherton," Klee offered. "White gunmen were used in New York."

The Whisperer chuckled harshly. There was cold mirth in his tone. For he recalled that the only time he knew of white gangsters having been used was in the assault on the Matsimo pier warehouse where John Rourke Nolting had been tortured.

That meant one of two things to The Whisperer. Nuto Klee knew about those white gangsters, either because he had hired them or because he had seen them from the warehouse. That would have been just before The Whisperer and Gregory Asherton had fled in The Whisperer's speedboat. And if Nuto Klee had fled from that pier just before The Whisperer did, he had gone by boat and *not* in Tagoya Matsimo's automobile, as both of them had sworn!

The skein could be more tangled than The Whisperer had realized. Or it could straighten itself into a single pattern that should have been obvious. Time, alone, would tell which of the two.

Still chuckling softly, the long arm of justce pulled himself erect on the little dock. He glided to a door of one of the connecting shacks, opened it and went inside.

There was a Diesel engineer in charge of the place. And he was One-eye, who had captured Quick Trigger and Slug. The chuckle of The Whisperer became a hiss of pleasure as he sprang. One-eye cursed. But he didn't have a chance. The Whisperer struck him with the fury of a madman! One-eye cried out and stumbled backward into the big Diesel. His head struck against the whirling flywheel, and it slammed him to the metal base of the big engine with a force that cracked his skull like an eggshell.

The Whisperer's voice was softer.

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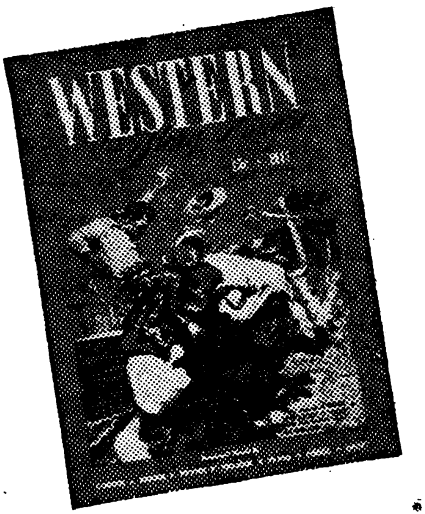

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"It is too bad," he said. "Alive, he could have told us much."

He padded over to the engine and pulled the throttle to neutral. The engine was a large, clutchless camshaft reverse job that started on compressed air. The silence seemed to be a tangible thing after the thumping of the engine.

"This is a monster pump as well as a lighting-circuit motor," The Whisperer commented.

A rumbling answered him.

"Yes, dang it. And you'd better start it up again, or they'll notice it and come a-runnin'."

The Whisperer leaped to a dark corner of the shack. He saw old Quick Trigger there, his hands and feet bound. Beside him was the burly form of Slug Minor. Neither was gagged. Apparently, the Diesel made so much noise that gags hadn't been thought necessary. Quick kept on talking.

"She runs a big suction pump that keeps a channel clear from here to deep water," he rumbled. "And they watch it closely to be sure that it keeps running. Better start it up again."

The Whisperer knew that Quick was right. He leaped back to the throttle, shoved it open, and the big motor picked up immediately with a rhythmic thumping noise. The black-clad man went back to Quick. He looked hard at the bald deputy and then at Slug Minor.

"I'll untie both of you, men," he husked. "But I want your co-operation, not your opposition."

Quick Trigger looked at Slug out of one corner of his eye.

"This is an espionage plot," he grunted. "I don't think The Whisperer would be mixed up in that sort of stuff."

Slug Minor wasn't interested in The Whisperer one way or another.

"We have to find out what happened to Wildcat," he growled. "Let's get some of those slant-eyed babies and give them the business."

Slug was mad at so many other people that he was quite willing to declare a truce with The Whisperer. He lurched to his feet when The Whisperer untied him. He spied Nuto Klee then, lunged at him with a roar; and by the time Quick was free, Slug was choking frothy words from the half-caste. The Whisperer spoke to Quick in low, insistent tones.

"Lay off him, you gorilla!" Quick Trigger bellowed. "We may need him later."

Slug put the half-caste down reluctantly.

Quick Trigger talked to The Whisperer. Slug may well have wondered why the gaunt deputy spoke to this outlaw as if he were making a report to a superior. But if any such thing did occur to him, he didn't show it. He glowered at Nuto Klee without saying anything.

"There's another prisoner here, somewhere," Quick told The Whisperer. "It is Johnny Sing Wong, the Chinese whom we found at the Nolting laboratory."

The Whisperer nodded.

"Johnny Sing Wong was the fiancé of Ming Lautoy before this business got under way. Where is he?"

Quick shrugged.

"We haven't been in any other room but this one. But I think he is down that way."

Quick Trigger indicated a grease-stained connecting door. The Whisperer nodded.

"We will go that way," he decided. He pointed at Nuto Klee. "You first."

It was apparent that The Whisperer intended to keep the half-caste in sight.

The door led to a long, low cavern-like building. Most of the seemingly connected shacks that stood on stilts out here formed really one continuous structure without partitions.

The light here was dim. But it could also be seen that a long, clean-prowed boat lay there. She was something of the type the United States uses for submarine chasers or torpedo boats—ninety feet or so overall, with a beam not more than fifteen feet, and undoubtedly powered by powerful twin-screw Diesels.

On the narrow platform that acted as a dock, inside of the fake series of shacks, they found Johnny Sing Wong, bound tightly. The Whisperer freed him while Quick Trigger and Slug surveyed the speedy craft.

It was into that situation that the sibilant tones of Tagoya Matsimo hissed with a note of considerable pleasure.

"Iss splendid," he said, "to find you all together."

Matsimo and the six rifle-armed Oriental guards materialized as if from nowhere. Matsimo stood in an open doorway. The others stood in windows, their guns trained and ready. Escape was impossible. Open warfare was equally out of the question. Both Quick and Slug had been relieved of their guns. Before them, the long, rakish boat was moored in the center of an inclosed basin.

Matsimo spoke stridently.

"Iss true, I am spy," he rapped. "Iss also true that none here will live to say so. Matsimo will go on serving his country."

The Whisperer bowed.

"You serve as you believe," he agreed.

Then, in the same tone of voice, as if he were merely further complimenting the Oriental on his work for his own country, The Whisperer switched to the one language that foreigners do not learn from their studies—pig latin.

"Umpjay intonay asinbay!" he rapped.

The Whisperer was standing behind Nuto Klee and Johnny Sing Wong. He didn't take a chance on their knowing pig latin. He shoved both lustily before one of the Matsimo guns could roar. Simultaneously, he, Slug, and Quick dived into the black water of the inclosed yacht basin. Guns blasted as the five men struck the surface. But the shots were too late.

The tide was still running out at a good five-mile clip. None of the fugitives had to swim to get clear. The current took them fifty yards or more from the wooden buildings before Matsimo and his men could get out onto the dock and shoot at them. The night, by now, was black.

"To the old hotel!" The Whisperer ordered. "And as soon as we get our feet on the ground, yell to attract their attention. I want them to follow us."

CHAPTER XII.

PLANNED ESCAPE.

Quick Trigger let out a roar that could be heard above the rumbling of the surf.

"Up to the big place!" he bellowed. "We can defend ourselves from there! Let's go!"

When he yelled it, Quick cupped his hands and turned his head so that the words would carry to Matsimo and the yellow-skinned killers out on the boathouse. But then he turned and looked quizzically at The Whisperer.

"I don't want them to stay out there," The Whisperer said. "I have plans for our friend Matsimo."

The crime fighter ran lightly toward the old hotel. He still shoved

Nuto Klee ahead of him. Johnny Sing Wong ran beside him. The Chinese had produced a slim knife from some secret sheath where it had escaped the search of his captors. He panted as he ran.

"What has happened to Ming Lautoy, one who whispers? I will cut the tongue and heart from one who harms her."

Although Johnny could not know it, the opportunity to do just that, was going to present itself more quickly than could reasonably be expected. The lights were on again in the huge abandoned hotel. The Whisperer shoved Nuto Klee into the short corridor they had taken in leaving the place. The door to the big room where Po, the Matsimo lieutenant, had held forth was still unlocked. The Whisperer, Nuto Klee and Johnny Sing Wong plunged into that room. A tableau of torture met their eyes!

Gregory Asherton was tightly bound. He was roaring threats and protests.

"She doesn't know, you damned fiend!" he snarled in his metallic voice. "If I could get free—"

Asherton saw The Whisperer then. And The Whisperer saw pretty Ming Lautoy, her feet bared and lashed. A charcoal brazier, similar to the one he had seen in the warehouse of Tagoya Matsimo in Manhattan, was glowing brightly. And the one called Po, his grotesquely twisted head wagging furiously, stood over the girl, a white-hot branding iron in one hand. Ming Lautoy's features were impassive as only a great will can be impassive in the face of torture. Three rifle-armed yellow men stood silently in the background, looking on with no show of concern.

The Whisperer saw that. But he was not the only one who did. There was a scream of rage and hate behind him. It is the sort of insensate scream some animals make when their mate or their den of young is attacked by an enemy. Johnny Sing Wong spoke in Chinese. It is probable that no person in the room save the girl and The Whisperer understood him.

"He is mine, one who whispers! His tongue and his heart are mine!"

The Whisperer had no time to protect Po. The three men with rifles brought them up as Johnny Sing Wong sprang across the room. The Whisperer dropped to one knee, twin engines of death in his hands. The riflemen abandoned Po. They had themselves to protect. But the delay in shifting from one target to another proved costly. Blue flame lanced the air again and again! The men with the rifles slumped, like emptied sacks, to the floor.

Po abandoned the girl then. He whipped out the peculiar short sword that he carried. Johnny Sing Wong's thin face was a mask of rage. He circled warily, his long slim knife clenched in his hand. The two men locked. Johnny Sing Wong leaped under the guard of his enemy, and the knife slashed down three times, sharply! The short sword gashed Johnny Sing Wong on the shoulder, but he paid no attention to the wound. He dropped the body of Po like the dead and useless thing that it now was.

Then he stooped quickly and slashed the bonds that held Ming Lautoy. In an instant, they were in each others arms. The Whisperer turned away, smiling tightly. The voice of Tagoya Matsimo came from outside. He was yelling orders in his native tongue, which The Whispeper could not understand. The long arm of justice leaned close to the skinny and trembling Nuto Klee.

The black-clad fighter's words were low. None heard them but Klee until he was almost finished.

"It is dark," the foe of crime concluded. "You can make it if you try."

Nuto Klee's little eyes took on a sudden, crafty expression. He surveyed the others with a measure of contempt.

"You are wise, one who whispers," he said shrilly. "We will make a bargain of it!"

Nuto Klee darted out of the door. There was the noise of shooting as the door opened to show a crack of light. But Nuto Klee was bent low, and the rifle bullets went harmlessly over his head.

Gregory Asherton began to curse The Whisperer as the half-caste went out. But The Whisperer merely chuckled to himself. He swiftly untied Asherton. Then he stood up listening. Rifle shots sounded from outside and glass in the windows shattered.

Then there were other shots, far toward the end of the building. They were not rifle shots. The reports were fuller, more blatant; not flat like the clean reports of a rifle.

"Come," The Whisperer snapped. "We are under siege and must defend ourselves. We must also make it last as long as we can. Trust me for a few moments more."

He scooped up the three rifles that Po's dead guards had held. He handed one each to Quick Trigger and Slug and the third to Asherton.

The tall blond man took the gun and said nothing. He seemed undecided at first. But it is difficult to turn against a man who has just saved your life.

"I'll follow," he said. "Where?"

"To where a brave girl is holding off the enemy," The Whisperer husked. "And through a tunnel that the spies believe only they know."

Quick Trigger cursed hollowly at The Whisperer's words. He knew that the girl to whom he referred must be Tiny.

And the long arm of justice was impatient. The old boiler firebox where he had left Tiny and Charley Lautoy was a perfect place to defend. It controlled a bottle neck as strategic as Horatius' place at the bridge.

But The Whisperer also realized that the girl had but one Police Positive loaded with only five potentially lethal shots.

Before The Whisperer led the way back through that underground passageway, he pointed to a window

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high up in the wall of the big room. He spoke to Quick Trigger.

"Fire a few rounds through that with the rifle. We want them to think we are barricading ourselves in here."

Quick did as he was told. The rifle barked flatly and slugs crashed through the glass. Then the black-clad figure opened the sliding panel to the inner passageway. Johnny Sing Wong and Ming Lautoy came close behind him, then tall Gregory Asherton, cradling his rifle in the crook of one arm. Quick and Slug brought up in the rear.

The Whisperer used his small pencil flash to illuminate the damp and dripping corridor that led from the fluorescent-lighted hallway above. He opened the door and padded silently down the time-worn steps. The first torch he came to he rekindled with a match. Then he carried that one, lightning other torches that he had extinguished on his previous trip through those dank turnings.

He passed the door of Tiny Traeger's erstwhile prison. He unlocked the door with the key he had taken from one of the guards. A quick glance inside informed him that the two yellow men he had overpowered earlier were still prisoners.

"Untie their feet and bring them," he told Asherton. "We cannot murder them without giving them a chance."

Gregory Asherton moved inside. It obviously didn't make much difference to him.

The next door that The Whisperer reached was the one through which he had seen stores of explosives. He paused there, giving brief instructions. It was Quick Trigger that he called into the lead.

"You will find your daughter in the second cellar beyond," he whispered. "She and Charley Lautoy are hidden in the firebox of an old boiler. I have counted the shots of the gun that Tiny Traeger has. There have been four. She has one left. Until then, she is safe. Go on. I will follow you."

Quick Trigger flashed his own torch through the small glass port in the door. Then he looked at the torch in The Whisperer's hand. Clearly, Quick would have argued if there hadn't been so much else going on. His face was anxious and worried.

The rest of the party went on, around a sharp turning in the masonry of the cellar corridor.

The Whisperer used one supersilenced pistol to shoot the lock from the wooden door of the powder chamber. Then he swung it open and crept into the room. As he did so, he dimly heard one more flat shot from down that dripping passageway. That, he deduced, was the final shot from the Police Positive he had left with Tiny Traeger.

A ghostly, whispering chuckle came from the ghostlike scrapper's lips. He tipped over a keg of blasting powder and let a thin trickle of the stuff drain across the damp masonry floor. He leaned over, shaped it with his fingers into a long, thin fuse. Then he dipped down with his lighted torch. There was a sudden *pffffft!* and a trailing burst of flame.

The Whisperer darted out of the door, slamming it behind him. He raced down the corridor after the party he had sent on before him. A fusillade of shots rang out as he scrambled into the cellar that contained the ancient, rusted boiler. Quick Trigger, Slug and Asherton were lying prone in the doorway, firing with their rifles. Just as The

Whisperer got there, there was a terrific detonation!

Quick yelled in excitement. All of the occupants of the cellar rushed to windows. It seemed as if the entire old hotel had been a part of a gigantic bomb. The whole roof lifted as if a mighty wind had gotten under it and was lifting it into the sky. There was a momentary hush. Then the concussion of the mighty explosion fell like a terrific blow from some celestial fist. All the occupants of the cellar were hurled to the ground.

The two persons inside of the boiler probably felt the concussion less than anyone else. Tiny Traeger crawled out presently. Her face was black and smudged. She turned and helped Charley Lautoy out also. The tong chieftain had regained much of his strength. He could stand, now.

Lautoy turned slowly and saw his daughter. Then he saw The Whisperer. His proud features trembled.

"One who whispers, you have saved us," he said slowly. "But have you also saved the thing that we seek?"

Breath hissed from the lips of the black-clad fighter.

"I do not know as yet, honorable one." He was peering out of a window of the cellar. He shook his head. "It seems that our enemies have come with reinforcements."

The night was clear, now. A three-quarter moon shone over the water. The Whisperer's eyes strained to see dim activity out there. Little, slant-eyed men poured from the shabby boathouse. They carried guns of various descriptions.

Swiftly, they ranged across the island. Four of them swam ashore from the boathouse, towing a small crate on a tiny raft. When they reached the shore, they ripped boards off from the crate. Concealed in it was a gun not much larger than a signal cannon. Perhaps a three-inch bore, bigger, actually, than a French 75!

They placed it in the sand and sighted on the cellar. All of this was mere preparation.

Gregory Asherton sighed gustily.

"It looks like they've got us this time," he said. He looked from Quick Trigger to The Whisperer.

"There is one thing that I want to clear up," he said. "Because of me, Ming Lautoy has been under an unjust suspicion."

The pretty Chinese girl protested.

"It was my duty—" she began.

Asherton waved her to silence.

"I was Ming Lautoy's economics professor in the American college she attended," he said. "And when this war began, I was commissioned as a reserve officer to intelligence work. I gave up my post then, to help uncover subversive activity and espionage. Ming Lautoy, recognizing me, loyally tried to help conceal my purpose as the true little American that she is."

Asherton was going on from there, but The Whisperer seized him by one arm, checked him.

"We are not through," he husked. "Listen!"

There were two sounds. One was the throb of powerful motors somewhere out on Great South Bay. And the other was the flat voice of Tagoya Matsimo. The importer advanced behind a narrow, deflecting shield of steel. He addressed only The Whisperer.

"Iss unfortunate," he hissed. "But I am forced to make a deal with The Whisperer. Produce the one I want, Whisperer, and we let you live. I will return to the land of my ancestors."

An eerie, whispering laugh answered Tagoya Matsimo. The Whisperer broke away from the cellar and stood in full sight of Matsimo. The laugh died on a chilling note.

"You are ready to trade, Whisperer?"

The husky voice dripped with a contempt that made Matsimo shiver.

"I have sent away the one you want, spy. He is where I can get him or where he will turn up if anything happens to The Whisperer or to any of those under his protection. You are beaten, Matsimo. Whatever way you turn, the secret of vitalizing China with the rice that will make her strong will live. At best, you can save your own lives."

CHAPTER XIII.

ESPIONAGE STRANDED.

Tagoya Matsimo's face went pale. But he was still in the poker game. His race was famous for taking gambles with the straight face of a sure winner.

"All of you will be wealthy," he argued. "Iss great amount of money for you all."

He leaned forward, hoping that greed would sway enough of the group to control the rest. The only reaction was a roar of rage. Before anyone could stop him, Charley Lautoy rushed from the cellar armed only with a knife. It was a suicidal try by a man who had been through too much.

And only one person dared interfere. The Whisperer sent a shot blasting after him, and then dived through the air and made a perfect tackle, spilling Charley Lautoy. Then he sat on top of the tall Chinese. His laugh was bitter and triumphant.

"Shoot, Matsimo! Shoot at me and destroy your one chance of finding Nuto Klee and the vitamin formula for China's rice!"

Matsimo screamed in rage. He rushed forward to try to seize The Whisperer. But at that moment, the throb of powerful motors became a physical reality. Two long, narrow boats shot into the strip of moonlight on Great South Bay. Rocket flares shot out from the decks of the two boats. The campaign hats and gray uniforms of State police showed in the glare of the rockets. The Orientals screamed.

Then, with muffled, droning power, the two boatloads of troopers rammed into the shore of the beach on the Great South Bay side of the island. Dark figures, Tommy-guns cradled in their arms, leaped ashore.

Matsimo screamed again. In his rage, he did blast one shot at The Whisperer! The black-clad scrapper stumbled and fell. The slug had only grazed him. But it staggered him for a moment, permitting the spy leader to race along with his men toward that shallow inlet. There was a sudden lull when the motors of the police boats halted.

Again, the thumping of that powerful Diesel in the boathouse thrust itself against the eardrums of the listeners. None but Quick Trigger, Slug and The Whisperer realized what it meant; perhaps, only The Whisperer. The yellow men sloshed through the shallow, swirling water, clambered upon the low dock at the boathouse edge.

The State police split into two groups. One of them cut loose with Tommy-guns and raced toward the edge of the shallow inlet. The other group, headed by Henry Bolton, started up toward the blasted ruins of the summer hotel.

The Whisperer struggled to his

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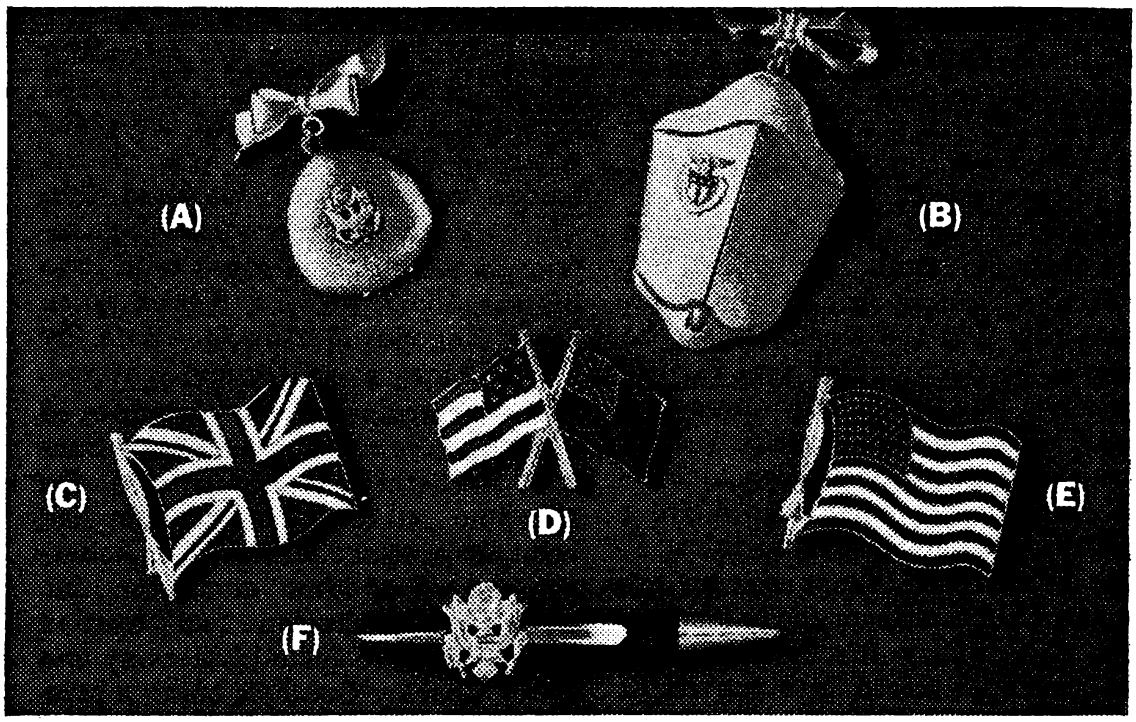

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feet, then. Quick Trigger was right beside him, helping.

"Wildcat," he whispered. "Snap out of it. Here comes Henry. You've got to get away."

The Whisperer shook his head, as if to clear his mind. He looked, not at Henry Bolton, but at the boathouse that hid the sleek cruiser he knew to be the getaway boat for the spy ring. He heard that thumping Diesel that had been sucking sand through great pipes to keep a channel clear in the soft, ever-shifting sand on the bottom of the inlet.

As he watched, there was an explosion that took everybody's attention. The flimsy shacks that made the boathouse lifted into the night like a tent carried away by a strong wind. There was a blinding flash of light. Then the drone of motors more speedy and powerful than the Diesel pumper burst into the night.

A yell went up from the State police. It was taken up by Asherton, by Charley Lautoy and the others. The moon went under a cloud then. There was just light enough to see that sleek marine greyhound leap from its moorings and head straight out toward the Atlantic Ocean. She went out with a speed that could be matched by few, if any boats, of her size. The nation that had planned that boat for a getaway had planned it well indeed.

There was silence for a moment. Then it was broken by an eerie, chuckling whisper that seemed to come from no particular direction. Henry Bolton let out a nasal squeal of anger.

"The Whisperer!" he yelped. "He's gone!"

Slug Minor looked at Henry distastefully.

"It's too bad you aren't gone, too," he muttered.

The Whisperer was not intending to be gone very long. He raced through the night toward the place where Wildcat Gordon had left the folded rubber boat. He used thin gloves to thwart the poison ivy, retrieved the boat and raced with it to his speedboat, which had been taken from Tagoya Matsimo's estate by Ming Lautoy and Gregory Asherton.

He remembered the slant-eyed gunman whom Asherton had strangled in the high swamp grass at the Matsimo estate. The gunman had been about to shoot him when Asherton had seized him. And from him, no doubt, Asherton had learned about this Fire Island hideaway and about Charley Lautoy's being a prisoner. That latter fact alone had been enough to make Ming Lautoy cooperate until she learned more of her father's fate.

The Whisperer chuckled softly. He climbed into the speedboat and slid back an almost invisible panel beside the dashboard. The Whisperer had climbed into both of the speedboats before he had hidden the collapsible rubber lifeboat. In this one, his own boat, he had turned off the gas line at a secret point that would prevent its being used.

And in the incident of Nuto Klee, he had opened the draining petcock of the tank. That boat that Klee had taken—Matsimo's boat—would run. It would run until the carburetor had emptied and then it would merely drift.

The Whisperer chuckled once again. He had known that, when he had suggested that Nuto Klee run for it, the half-caste would leave in the boat that had brought him. Klee had jumped to the conclusion that The Whisperer was reacting to his first suggestions.

When the half-caste had pretended

to be a fellow prisoner in the cellar below Doyers Street, he had suggested to The Whisperer that he had a secret to sell that should not be ignored! And Nuto Klee was out there now, waiting for a rendezvous with The Whisperer; waiting for a private settlement of their business.

But Nuto Klee little realized what that settlement was going to be!

The Whisperer dropped the folded life raft into the speedboat, then kicked the starters of the two motors and backed off into the night. The moonlight was dim as he roared away from the island. But it was enough to enable The Whisperer to see a drifting speck. He headed for that and found Nuto Klee.

The half-caste was scared. But when he first saw The Whisperer, he felt a little better. The wraithlike fighter leaped aboard Klee's boat, letting his own drift at the end of a single mooring line.

"You've run your course, Klee," he said. "Hand over John Rourke Nolting's formula. I am satisfied now that you were hired by Matsimo to do the killing and that you double-crossed Matsimo by taking the formula for yourself. You wanted to sell it either to me or to Charley Lautoy."

Nuto Klee smiled thinly.

"So?"

"So, you are going to sell it to me, Klee. You are going to sell it for a fair trial in court for murder. Otherwise, I will kill you here."

Nuto Klee gasped. He believed The Whisperer. The black-clad enemy of crime moved slowly back in the boat. One supersilenced pistol glinted in his right hand. Nuto Klee had seen what those guns could do. He whimpered and put one hand up in front of his face. The Whisperer lashed down with the gun, cutting the flesh of the half-caste killer's face.

Nuto Klee broke then. He laughed shrilly. He babbled half coherently. He sat down and took off one shoe; then he ripped the sole apart and took out a sheet of paper.

"Here it is, Whisperer," he gloated. "Here is all I have, and all I had to sell. John Rourke Nolting had one more step to complete his work. He didn't develop it. The formula was never finished. Here is what there is, and it won't do you much good."

He hurled the paper down on the floor boards of the boat. The Whisperer stooped to pick it up. As he grasped it, Nuto Klee moved like a striking snake. He whipped out an automatic pistol and squeezed the trigger.

But The Whisperer was even quicker. He twisted, slashing one compact fist down on the half-caste's gun wrist. Then The Whisperer jumped. He leaped completely overboard into the dark waters of Great South Bay.

When the fuel tank of a boat is drained, the gasoline doesn't flow down onto the ground as it does in an automobile. It flows into the bottom of the boat and must be pumped overboard for safety. Nuto Klee fired his automatic three times from pure reflex. And the slugs tore into the bottom of the boat, sparking against the metal of the clutch housing.

There was a giant *whoom!* A pillar of flame that was seen for miles took the boat and Nuto Klee up into the air.

And neither was seen again.

The Whisperer, wet, but still clutching a white paper that he hoped might mean the end of famine for millions of peaceful people,

swam back to his own boat. The mooring line had parted, burning. The Whisperer climbed aboard. Then he took out a pump and began to inflate the rubber boat in which Wildcat Gordon, Quick Trigger and Slug had reached the island.

Wildcat Gordon, at the moment, was the subject of considerable discussion on the tip of Fire Island where there had a little while before been an abandoned summer hotel. Henry Bolton was quite plaintive about it.

"He's been gone long enough to get the marines, if you ask me. Even in a rubber boat, he could have paddled over to Bayport."

Quick Trigger was dubious. He had seen the explosion that had killed Nubo Klee. Quick was afraid that it had been The Whisperer.

The State police were still rounding up stray yellow men. Most of them were willing to talk, now. Their boss had gotten away without them and they felt pretty bitter. They admitted that Tagoya Matsimo had been the head of a spy ring. His pose as a peace advocate and a friend of man had made it pretty easy.

Quick had asked why Matsimo had been so willing to proffer information about the killing of Nolting when he didn't know whether Hong Chung had lived long enough to tell his story to Wildcat. The yellow men had laughed at that. Po, they said, had given the chloropicrin gas to Hong Chung outside of headquarters and Matsimo had indeed known that death was inevitable.

This line of questioning was interrupted by a hail from the bay. There was a sound of paddling and Wildcat Gordon splashed in with the rubber boat.

"I must have paddled in the wrong direction in that fog," he explained. "I forgot to take the compass from Quick Trigger."

Quick Trigger snorted.

Wildcat climbed out of the rubber boat, holding a beer bottle in one hand.

"You sure find funny messages in a bottle," he said. "Here's one that seems to be from The Whisperer. It says that Matsimo hired Nuto Klee to kill Nolting. But instead, Klee found a bum who answered the legal description of Nolting and switched the corpse after knocking Nolting out and setting fire to his car. Matsimo was afraid of Klee then, because Klee told him that he had planted the Nolting formula where it would turn up if Matsimo harmed him.

"It seems that Klee only got part of Nolting's formula, because the last step had just been completed. He took Nolting to Matsimo's warehouse dock to try to torture the rest of it out of him. But Asherton trailed him there, and he lit out for Long Island in Matsimo's boat. From there, he came out here because Lautoy was here; and Lautoy was his best chance to make a real profit on the business."

Asherton cleared his throat.

"It is unfortunate," he said. "Incomplete, the formula cannot relieve famine, which was Nolting's real purpose."

Johnny Sing Wong stood to one side, his arm around Ming Lautoy. His voice was husky.

"I have the rest of it," he said. "Mr. Nolting was afraid something was going to happen to him. That was what he had told me to get from his desk. But he told me not to let anyone know about it if the rest of the formula was lost."

Asherton sighed. He was pleased and yet perturbed.

"It was a good night's work," he said. "But we did let the quarry get away."

Wildcat Gordon swung around. He looked like a man who was chagrined at having lost his rubbers.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I almost forgot. The Whisperer's message also said that we would find Matsimo in his boat not far off shore. He said something about a huge suction pump that was keeping a channel clear. It seems that he reversed the Diesel engine."

A yell went up from the State police. A portable searchlight was flashed out onto the surf.

And there was the fast, rakish cruiser of the espionage ring. The men aboard it were clearly trapped.

Tiny Traeger had moved over beside Wildcat Gordon. Her assurance had returned to her. She looked at him sharply.

"Quite a fellow, this Whisperer," she observed. "It is really remarkable how quickly you could memorize his message. You should have been a public speaker."

Quick Trigger coughed behind Tiny.

"Get over there under cover," he rumbled. "Dang it, you'll catch cold out here, Tiny."

THE END.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

They must have been an unhappy lot of young men, these hand-picked youths who were selected to help with our national defense program, for every one of them committed suicide just when he was about to start on this important job! It was not until The Whisperer got on the

SUICIDE TRAIL

that the real reason for all these murders became apparent. You'll find it a trail of chills and suspense from start to finish when you read this complete Whisperer novel in our next issue, together with the other fine stories we have scheduled to go along with it! Don't miss

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WITH THE WHISPERER

Continued from page 6

it, so urge them to buy The Whisperer also.

We always like to receive letters from the readers of The Whisperer, whether it be praise—and, oh, how we like praise!—or candid protests against some phase of our magazine, or suggestions for giving you followers exactly what you want. We continually strive in our constant search for a variety of exciting and interesting stories; but it is no more than human that occasionally something slips by us, and then we get a tip from one of our readers that just hits home.

I am very pleased to tell you that I have been a constant reader of The Whisperer for a long time, having first come upon the short stories in *The Shadow* magazine a few years ago when I was attending boys' camp. I was delighted to find last year that The Whisperer was being published as a complete magazine, and since then have read every issue.

I think the stories are great. Clifford Goodrich sure has some imagination. I particularly enjoy the character because the person of Wildcat Gordon as a young police commissioner and his adoption of The Whisperer's guise makes him appear so real.

Looking forward to more and more enjoyable reading of The Whisperer, I remain an ardent follower.—Warren Delong, Glens Falls, New York.

Let me compliment you and Clifford Goodrich for the exciting plot in the novel, "The Dyak Murders." I have read every one of The Whisperer stories to date and am being continually pleased that each story is better than the last. I also liked "The Secret Menace," but in "The Dyak Murders," I found an unusual mystery of the Far East and its uncivilized people which I think is intriguing in this type of story. I would like to see more of it in the future. Something with a Chinese background, for instance.

Also, I would like you to clear up one thing that has been bothering me. That is, the position of Quick Trigger. In the early issues, I was led to believe that old Quick was a retired deputy, but he seems to work right along with Wildcat Gordon and to be quite active in police business. Perhaps I missed some explanation concerning this, but by no means think that I don't want Quick Trigger in the stories. I think he's great! —Wayne Colwell, Yonkers, New York.

What do other readers think of the suggestion of a weird background in our stories? You that would like to read one with a Chinatown setting should find the novel in this very issue just what you've been looking for. As for Quick Trigger: He has been long a friend of Wildcat Gordon, having been deputy under Wildcat's father, when the senior Gordon was police commissioner, and later placed on the retired list. But when young Wildcat was made commissioner, he immediately had old Quick reinstated to active duty on his staff.

I am a young girl of high-school age who has passed by the more common pastimes of girlhood for the much more exciting pleasure of reading detective stories. I am a Street & Smith fan and place The Whisperer at the top of my list. I also read *Clues-Detective Stories, Mystery* and *The Shadow*. And here is where I want to make a suggestion. In *The Shadow*, I notice that many readers want you to take out the girl character, Margo Lane. Now, I don't know what you intend doing about this, but I do hope you won't let anyone influence your removing Tiny Traeger from The Whisperer stories. There are undoubtedly many girls like myself who enjoy reading these novels, and the presence of a girl in the stories make them much more enjoyable for us. Also, why not have Tiny aid Wildcat more than she does, on her own hook, even though Wildcat is insistent on keeping her out of trouble? Congratulations to you for your good work.—Nancy Strang, Chicago, Ill.

COME HOME AND DIE

By Gary Barton

It was Jerry Langdon's job to protect Sue Adams from a spy ring, all the time not really knowing that *she* herself wasn't a spy!

I sat on the edge of the bed, watching her, feeling the beads of cold sweat that started to break on my face and blinking my eyes against the smoke that drifted up from the cigarette, dangling in my mouth, and trying not to let her know that it wasn't the smoke. And I kept thinking, *"Men don't kill girls like her. They die for them."*

I watched her, wanting to ask her so many things, and wanting to for-

get about the smoke in my eyes; wanting to cry like a child, to scream, and take her out of here and run away. But doing none of these things. Just sitting there and watching her, saying nothing.

The collar of her coat was thrown back, and her black hair, still wet from the rain outside, glistened in the yellow light of the little room. She was tall and slim and beautiful, with a youthful freshness—the proud tilt of her head, the red softness of her lips, a warmth that radiated from her. I remembered a kid in high school, a pretty kid; I remembered a college campus. To me, she still looked like a little girl—not a girl who was mixed up in all this, with death following her.

Then I saw the tiny bulge that showed beneath her tight skirt, just above the knee, and it destroyed all that. I knew it was a gun, and it gave me a little chill. I've seen men carry guns and use them; seen them jump and flame and vomit death in their hands. But seeing a girl pack a gun in a leg holster was somehow different, ominously different, because I knew she'd use it.

For a long time she hadn't said very much. She just paced up and down, her high heels making nervous little tapping sounds on the bare floor. Her fingers were long and slim and very white around the little locket she held in her hand.

Then what she said was: "It's so awful to have to wait to die, Jerry. To know that death is lurking near you, but not knowing where or how to defend yourself." She kept her voice very low, and it sounded husky and strained.

I nodded my head. Somehow, I couldn't find the words I wanted to say; so I just nodded, squinting my eyes again through the haze of smoke at the locket.

It was small, just an ordinary locket, about the size of a silver dollar, but much thicker, and hung on a thin gold chain that threaded through her fingers.

She was saying: "This has to be it, Jerry. This must be the reason—"

She handed it to me and I twirled it about a moment on the chain. It was very light; some inexpensive metal, I decided. I found the little catch on the side and opened it. It was empty. Just an ordinary locket, and I couldn't figure it out. It was seemingly valueless.

Valueless? It was worth a girl's life!

"Start from the beginning, Sue," I said. "I mean, before you came back to the States; how you got this locket."

"It was in Lisbon," she said. "I'd been doing articles in London and was in Lisbon waiting for passage on the Clipper back home. It's the melting pot of Europe, Jerry. People of all kinds are there. Spies from every nation eat in the same restaurants, drink at the same bars. You have no friends in a place like that, Jerry. You trust no one."

She paused to lean over and get a light from my cigarette, then stood there a minute, as if trying to go back across the sea. Then she went on:

"I met a young fellow there. An American. His name was Vinnie Southard, and I liked him a lot. I don't think it was any more than that; you don't think of those things in a place like that. But we were two people from home thrown into the same hell, and we had a few laughs together when laughs meant a lot. Well, before Vinnie left—he left by boat, and I was leaving later by Clipper—he gave me this locket."

"Did he say what it was?"

"No. He said it was just a remembrance. We were in a bar at the time, and I saw that it wasn't expensive; so I did keep it as a token."

"And when did you tie the locket up with these threats?" I asked Sue. "When you reached New York?"

"Yes, Jerry. But I remember now that it does go back to Lisbon. I remember being followed twice, each time while going back to my hotel. And the time my room at the hotel was broken into. My bags were opened; everything was strewn about. But nothing was taken. I didn't think much of it at the time because, as I said, there are all kinds of people in Lisbon.

"When I arrived in New York, two nights ago, I received a telephone call. I don't know who it was, but he told me to bring the locket up to the Silver Inn, a cheap club in the lower East Bronx. I waited because I wanted to get in touch with you before I went up there. I got another call, and yesterday I moved from my apartment. Last night, at the place I was staying, the same person called again and said that if I didn't bring the locket I would be dead before midnight, tonight. So today I moved to this shabby little hotel."

I took a long drag on my cigarette and dropped the butt on the bare floor, grinding it under my heel before I spoke.

"What about Vinnie Southard?" I said then. "Where do you think he fits in?"

She looked at me and her eyes were wet.

She said: "I think he's dead, Jerry."

She came over and sat down beside me, and for a while there was a long silence. Both of us stared at the locket, looking so prosaic and harmless, but, to us, as stained with murder and death as a blood-smeared creese:

Then I asked her: "Are you frightened here, Sue? Do you think they'll find you?"

She smiled, a little tired smile, but her large, heaven-blue eyes were dull, without humor. "No," she said softly, "I'm not afraid. It's been a long time since I've thought of being afraid. Over there, before Paris fell, in London, with bombs shrieking around you, and smoke and flame, the incendiaries—I never really thought I'd live this long." She butted her cigarette in a tray and looked at me, and I almost cried —that look in her eyes. She said: "It's this waiting, Jerry. Over there, you sort of expect it. You see a plane, or hear the screech of a bomb, and you say: 'This is it! It's hell, but it's got to come, sometime.' But it's this waiting to die, Jerry. Not knowing when it's coming; not being able to put your finger on it and say: 'Here it comes. This is it!' "

You don't say anything at a time like that. You don't even move. You can't. It was the resignation in her voice, that haunting huskiness, the hopelessness. This girl, so young and so pretty. She knew she was going to die, and she didn't care any longer, because she had come from a country where death was supreme and men lived by the day, by the hour, because they knew it had to come.

But I knew there had to be another way. No, I wasn't just sorry for Sue Adams. It was more than that. I don't know what it was, but it was something you can't explain and you don't read in books and they don't teach you in Psychology II.

I just swung the little locket around my fingers and looked at her. I hoped that she could see it in my eyes and that I wouldn't have to say anything. But I said: "Don't worry, Sue. They won't get you." And I meant it.

I shoved the locket in my pocket and walked out the door. I listened for the double click to make sure the door was locked. Then I walked down the stairs and through the small lobby to the street.

The rain hadn't stopped, and a heavy fog hung in the dark street, broken only by the dull yellow glow of the street lights. I stood in the entranceway of the hotel and pulled up the collar of my trench coat and looked carefully up and down the street.

There was a heavy black sedan parked at the curb, just beyond the glow of the street light, about fifty feet from the hotel. I squinted my eyes through the fog and darkness. It was hard to see, but I could make out the figures of two men in the front seat. I think there was another in back.

I went back through the hotel, walking fast, and out the rear door to the next street. Then I doubled around the block, behind the sedan, and slid into a dark doorway across the street where I could watch both the car and the entranceway.

I stood there, shivering in the cold wet air that blew in from the street. And shivering with something else that wasn't any part of the rain or the dampness!

I could see that there were two men in the front seat of the sedan, now. The rear was empty. I had been mistaken; a trick of the confusing light.

There was no doubt in my mind what the car was doing there, and I played with the thought of rushing back to Sue's room. I glanced up at the fourth-floor window. Her light was still on, and the worn shade was drawn. I took another tug at my coat collar and started out of the doorway, easing my holstered gun from under my armpit with my elbow as I did.

Then a man swung into the doorway! He was tall and slim, with a wet felt pulled low over his eyes. His tweed reversible was dripping. He stood in front of me, blocking my way, staring at me through the darkness. I slid my hand through the flap of my coat and slipped the .38 out of its sling.

The fellow struck a match and cupped it with his hands, then held it to a cigarette that dangled from his thin lips. His cold black eyes caught the light and still held over the glare, searching my face. Then he held the cupped match closer to me.

He said: "You're liable to catch cold out here, Jerry."

My fingers tightened around the butt of my gun, but I still kept it under my coat. My voice was tight. "You don't know me," I told him, because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Sure I do, Jerry," he said casually. "Sure I do. You're Jerry Langdon. A private dick. I've seen you around."

"Who are you, fella? What are you doing around here?"

"Me? My name's Southard. Vinnie Southard!" He glanced up at the hotel. At Sue's window! I'm a newspaperman. I chased a lead back from Europe. Spy case. Espionage stuff? I'm checking on it."

That rocked me. Vinnie Southard! The guy Sue had told me

at last

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about. The one Sue thought was dead.

I said: "You're supposed to be dead!"

"Dead, Jerry?" His eyes were slitted, and his lips twisted a bit in a hard smile. "You better call a museum, Jerry. I'm a miracle. I'm a walking corpse." He dropped the lighted match and rubbed his fingers briskly on his wet coat. Then he asked: "Who told you I was dead, Jerry?"

"Sue Adams thought—"

"Sue Adams?"

"Yeah. The girl you met in Lisbon. The girl you gave the—" I stopped.

Vinnie Southard said coldly: "I don't know Sue Adams, Jerry!"

Suddenly, I heard the cough and roar of a heavy motor, the swift mesh of gears. The sedan was pulling away from the curb. I looked up at Sue's window. The light was out!

I pushed past Vinnie Southard in the doorway. He tried to press his tall body in front of me, and I smashed a hard left into his face. He went down and I went over him, out into the street, across the sidewalk and into the road. My hand was out of my coat, now; the gun heavy and cold in my fist.

The sedan was racing down the street, its headlights picking me out of the fog. I didn't think I could beat it; I knew I couldn't beat it! But I kept going. My long legs churning the wet roadway, the curb coming toward me, the red brick wall of the hotel coming fast toward me. My foot hitting the sidewalk.

And out of the tail of my eye, I caught the bright glare of the sedan's headlights swinging toward me, the black hood chasing me over the curb! I saw its wheels hit the curb and bounce. Then everything was suddenly a whirling kaleidoscope of black snouts of cars and screaming rubber on wet pavements and sidewalks! Of numbness and pain at the same time spreading down my leg; pain with all the red rage of hell burning through the whole side of my body. And the red brick wall of the hotel coming toward me again, only faster, now!

And then hitting the wall!

I remember, in that split crazed moment, being thrown against the wall, smashing against the red bricks with explosive force, dropping hard to the pavement and lying there, numb, the breath knocked from me, unable to move, and everything fading fast in a black fog, another fog, that was cloaking me. I remember thinking what Sue had said: *"This is it!"*

It seemed hours that I lay there, hours of red flashes mingling with that black fog, and pain and agony searing through me; my head pounding sickeningly. I heard the noise of the sedan's motor, seeming very far away, now. I thought I heard it stop, then roar to life again and fade away in the night.

Then the pain wasn't so bad, and the red flashes had died away. The black cloak swept over me, tighter, smothering; and I fell into a world where there is no pain or black snouts of sedans or hard brick walls. And I wasn't fighting it.

I don't know how long I lay there. The sidewalk was wet and cold against my face. My head was bursting and my side was numb. Slowly, I moved my arms, then my legs. I guess I was surprised to find that I could move them. And as life and strength flowed back into my body, I pushed myself to my feet, grasping the hotel wall for support.

I thought of Sue. A dreadful thought. Of the men in the sedan. Of Sue kidnapped. Of Sue dead!

It wiped the agony from my side. It cleared my head and fired my body. I hobbled past the entranceway of the hotel and through the small lobby.

There was a blue-clad cop talking to the night clerk at the desk. Another was at the foot of the stairs. My heart squeezed inside my chest, and there was a nauseating emptiness that filled deep inside me.

I snapped at the cop near the stairs: "What happened?"

"Suicide! A babe upstairs bumped herself."

"Fourth floor?" The words choked in my throat.

"Yeah! Room 403."

I pushed past him to the stairs, my thoughts swirling and incongruous, my eyes wet and not trying to hide them.

"Hey!" the cop yelled, but I didn't stop. I didn't really hear him. I went up the narrow stairway, still hobbling, still favoring my leg, but still going fast.

There was a cop at Sue Adams' door, and the door was open. I flashed my shield without giving him a chance to really look at it and raced into the room.

The precinct men were there, plain-clothes dicks. A fingerprint expert was dusting the room, and a lab photographer was shooting the position of the body.

She lay on the floor, in front of the bed where I'd been sitting. Her raincoat, open at the throat, was twisted about her, and her dark hair fell down about her shoulders. I went over to her.

She wasn't very nice to look at. The bullet had smashed through her head, between her ear and the temple. It had done awful things to her face! I studied it closely—the body, the direction of the bullet, the wound. It was hard to kneel there and look at her like that but I had to; and my face was hard, my mouth was dry.

One of the precinct dicks came over. I knew him. Tom Moran. I asked him: "Suicide?"

"Yeah, Jerry. Suicide! We found the gun in her hand. We're just making a routine check." Then he said: "You know her, Jerry?"

I looked at her again.

"No," I said slowly. "No, I don't know her, Tom."

I stood up and walked out the door without saying anything more. I went down to the lobby and out to the street.

I kept walking around in the rain, not knowing where to go, not knowing for how long, not caring. I hadn't held out on Tom Moran at the hotel. I hadn't lied to him. I didn't know who the dead girl was. Of only one thing I was certain—she *wasn't* Sue Adams!

It didn't make sense. Every time I went out on an angle, I got lost. Sue Adams had claimed her life was in danger through a locket, an empty locket, which Vinnie Southard had given her in Lisbon. And she thought that Vinnie had been murdered.

But Vinnie Southard was far from dead. Not only that, but *he* had claimed to be following a spy lead, which obviously meant that Sue was tied up with a spy ring. But why, then, had she faked a suicide and left a murdered girl in her room? And why had she called me in on the case, unless she wanted to use me for a dupe in the racket?

No, it didn't make sense. And I

couldn't see what I was going to do about it.

Then I remembered Sue's mentioning the Silver Inn, a cheap club up in the Bronx. I ducked into an all-night drugstore and looked up the address in the phone book. Then I hopped a cruising cab and went there.

On the way up to the Bronx, I played with the idea of Vinnie Southard's being mixed up in this thing. I wondered why he'd give a girl an ordinary locket and then try to kill her for it. Or even kidnap her. I couldn't figure this one, either, so I stopped trying.

The only angle that reared its ugly head was that Sue Adams was tied in with a spy ring and had tried to use me for a fall guy. But I didn't think so. I didn't want to.

The taxi pulled up in front of the Silver Inn. I paid the driver and went in.

Sue Adams had been right. It was a cheap dive—a short beer-slopped bar, a four-piece orchestra playing off beat, a dame singing a hot arrangement of "Come Play With Me." The bar wasn't crowded; so I went there, deciding to look around a bit and get a look at the place before making any move. I ordered a beer.

The voice behind me said: "We've been looking for you, Jerry."

I swung around. It was Tom Moran, with another plain-clothes dick beside him. His voice was anything but friendly. The lines in his face were drawn and his eyes were dull.

"Looking for me, Tom? What's wrong?"

"Murder, Jerry," he said bitingly. "That young kid in the hotel, downtown. You know what we mean."

I smelled a frame. And mixed with the iciness of Moran's tone, no one had to tell me that I was in a tough spot.

"I didn't have anything to do with that kill," I pleaded. Then, as I thought of it: "You said yourself it was suicide!"

"We thought so," Moran said. "But ballistics checked the slug that killed her. It didn't come from the gun in her hand." He paused a moment, looking steadily at me. Then he said: "Where's your gun, Jerry?"

My hand shot to my shoulder holster, and my heart sank. I remembered the race across the street, the big sedan clipping me with its fender, the gun in my hand, and then my being flung against the wall. I'd forgotten to pick up the gun when I regained consciousness.

Moran pulled my coat open wide. The holster was empty!

I tried to press another point, saying quickly: "How did you know I'd be in this dive, Tom? I've never been *here* before."

"We got a tip, a phone call, saying that you'd be here. Also that you'd stolen a locket from the dead girl." He reached in my pocket and pulled out the locket that Sue Adams had given me.

He fingered the clasp and snapped it open. And my head spun; my eyes must have stood out that far. The locket wasn't empty!

It *wasn't* the same locket Sue had given me! It was fixed up like a tape measure, and you could pull the tape out on a roll.

"Let's see that!" I snapped and grabbed it out of Moran's hand.

I pulled the tape out, reading swiftly, feverishly. There was enough on that tape to blow the state department wide open; to blow the whole country to hell! It was spy stuff all right. Names and ad-

dresses—big ones, too. Names you and I know and have seen in the newspapers. And orders and details. It was hot! It was more than that. It was treacherous and menacing—all the menace that lies between freedom and enslavery by a foreign nation!

And I thought again of the frame-up. It added to the angle I'd thought of, riding up here in the cab. I saw Vinnie Southard's name spread across all this, written in big red letters.

I said to Tom Moran, and I guess my elation was in my voice: "The fellow who tipped you off about me—was his voice smooth and cultured, as if he'd lived abroad a long time?"

"No, Jerry," he said, "it wasn't. You see, it wasn't a man. It was a girl!"

It was like taking a punch when you're not expecting it. It was my last card; I'd played and lost. I guess Tom Moran saw it in my face, because he said:

"Let's go, Jerry."

We went out past the bar, the three of us, Moran on one side and his stooge on the other, and through the door to the street. Their car was at the curb. Moran opened the left door and climbed in, squeezing his bulk over the wheel. I started to follow; it was obvious that I was to sit in the front between them.

Then I slammed the front door closed and, all in the same movement, drove a stiff right into the other dick's face. He slumped, and I caught him by the front of the coat long enough to swing him around and let go another one that smashed him against the door, blocking it.

I started to move!

I could hear Moran's yells from inside the car, as he tried to get the door open. I heard the blast of a gun, then another, and two lead slugs went singing over my head like a pair of hornets. I knew they were shooting over my head; so I kept running.

They weren't trying to wing me. They thought I was a pal, I guess. A private dick. Well, maybe I was.

But, hell, I was wanted for murder!

I raced into the first alley I came to. My leg was throbbing again and getting numb, but I kept going. Down that long alley, through pitch-blackness, my steps echoing against the walls of buildings on either side. Then I heard a yell from behind me, the rapid fire of service pistols, and hard-packed gravel kicking up around my feet. I could tell by the sound of the shots that Moran and his stooge were using Police Positives; and a Positive is a heavy gun for that range, especially when they were shooting at my legs.

Then I was nearing the end of the alley and my heart skipped a couple of beats. At this end, I'd be a perfect target, silhouetted against the brighter light of the next street. Like a bull's-eye on a white background. I cut in closer to the buildings to build up my chances and raced out of the mouth of the alley. I kept on across the street and jumped a cab, parked under a street light, just as a big sedan wheeled around the corner.

"Get going!" I told the cabby and slammed the door.

I flashed my shield at him. It's really marvelous what that shield will do as long as you don't take time to show the word "Private" on it.

The cabby fed coal to his heap, then slowed for a red light. "Forget it!" I snapped. And maybe he

liked the opportunity of thumbing his nose at the lights, because he grinned and beat every one for six blocks.

Then he looked up into his rear-view mirror and said: "Thought you'd want to know, cap—we've been tailed for the last six blocks. Shall I lose him?"

I looked around. There was a sedan following us. A big black sedan. It was the same one that had swung around the corner when I lit out of that alley. And I'd seen it before that. It was the black sedan that had tried to pick me off in front of Sue Adams' hotel, earlier tonight!

"No," I said, "don't lose him. Get into heavy traffic."

I had an idea. That sedan back there could only add up to one thing, and I was going to take advantage of it.

As the cab swung into the downtown theatre section, I thought of a line I'd heard once: *"And a little child shall lead them—"* I didn't know where the child led whom, but I knew that the sedan was going to lead *me* straight to hell if I wasn't careful!

"How's this, cap?" my driver called over his shoulder.

We were tied up on a westbound street in the Forties. I shot a glance out the rear window. The sedan was two cars behind.

"I'm dropping off here," I told the cabby. I tossed a five-dollar bill on the front seat. I said: "Pull closer to that cab line. After I get out, keep going for about a block as if you still had a fare. Then pull up and park."

I slid out the door and crept along the side of the cab in a duck walk. When I got to the front of the hack, I crossed to the sidewalk and slid into a parked taxi.

"Don't let on I'm in here, Jack," I said to that driver. I pulled out another fin. "I'll tell you what to do in a minute."

Maybe it was only about two minutes—it seemed like twenty—but soon the line of traffic started moving. The sedan went by, still obviously intent on following my first cab. And I said: "Follow that big black job, Jack."

We pulled out of the taxi stand.

I breathed a heavy sigh of relief as my trick worked. The mouse was now chasing the cat, and my only hope was that the sedan would lead me to where I wanted to go. I thought it would.

It did. The sedan drove around in circles for a while, probably wondering where I'd disappeared. Then it had headed downtown and ended up in the Village.

The three men piled out in front of an old walk-up over a beer joint. I had my hacky ease down to the end of the block; then I gave him his five and walked back in the darkness.

I thought at first of going on up to the apartment, but I realized that there were at least three men there with rods! And those boys don't carry guns because they have a field-and-stream complex. I decided on taking the chance that they were just "reporting in" and wouldn't stay long. I went into the bar and ordered a beer.

I'd ordered three more and put a quarter in the juke box before the sedan pulled away from the curb out front. Then I made a phone call and went out.

There was no one on the dark street; so I slipped into the doorway and crept up the stairs, feeling my way along the wall till I reached

the landing. There was a dim light peeking from under the crack of the door; and, as I stood there, I could hear only the sound of my own breathing and the blood pounding in my temples. My throat was dry and my stomach muscles were a tight knot.

I was trying to make up my mind what move to make next when the door opened.

Vinnie Southard stood in the light of the small room, one hand on the doorknob, his other raised to the light switch on the wall.

"Hello, Vinnie. Remember me?"

All in the same moment I wondered how many hoods he had in that room with him. I wondered if the boys in the sedan would come back and creep up the dark stairs in back of me. But I couldn't give Vinnie Southard a chance to see that. I pushed him back into the room and followed, kicking the door closed behind me.

Vinnie looked at me a moment and his mouth was no longer the tight slash; his eyes weren't as cold.

"Hiya, Jerry. What's new?" And I could tell he didn't give a damn. My being here was new enough for him. Then he said: "A detective friend of yours was looking for you, Jerry. Did you see him?"

I knew he was feeling me out. "A detective, Vinnie? No, I didn't. What did he want?"

His lips quivered a little, and his eyes moved restlessly toward the door.

"Was it about a locket, Vinnie? This locket?" I shoved my hand into my trench-coat pocket. But I didn't pull it out. I wasn't going to let him know that Tom Moran had taken the locket from me.

"You . . . you've still—" He stopped. Then: "Look, Jerry, I have a rush appointment. I've got to—"

I stepped into him then and flicked a stiff right across his mouth. He might have been big; but he wasn't that big. He staggered backward a few steps and sat down hard on an old couch at the side of the room. A leg gave and he went down farther.

"O. K.—give!" I snapped at him. "I was only playing that time. And I'm really anxious to work you over!"

He looked up at me from where he'd slumped, his face white, his hands trembling as he wiped the blood from his mouth.

"Give what, Jerry?" I wondered if he was going to cry. "I don't know what—"

I rapped my knuckles across his mouth again.

"About the locket. About Sue Adams. Where is she?"

He was covering his face with his arms and backing up till he was against the wall.

"O. K., Jerry. I'll tell you how it is." His eyes strayed to the door again. "I was in Paris when France fell and couldn't get out. Then, a month or so ago, I was told that they'd let me go if I'd smuggle

orders to the agents of a spy ring in the United States. Well, when you've been holed up in a place like that—being kicked around, not a decent place to sleep, eating rotten food, if you *do* eat—you forget a lot of things. You forget principles; you just want to get away. So I did it."

His eyes grew bright and he talked fast. His fingers nervously worried the tattered cover on the couch as he went on: "But when I got out of France, I thought about what I was doing to my country. But I knew I was being watched in Lisbon; so I decided to give a locket —similar to one in which I carried the foreign stuff—to a girl. I thought the agents watching me would go after her, wanting to get the stuff back; then I'd be able to get away, dump the stuff, and nobody would have to bring it across."

"So you were willing to sacrifice a girl's life," I snarled. My voice was bitter.

"No! I thought they'd just steal the locket and leave her alone. But when I got to the States, I found out that she still had it and that the spy ring was trying to get it. So I staged a fake suicide so they'd lay off. And then—"

He shuddered uncontrollably. It must have been the look on my face. And I felt all the intense hate that one man can have for another.

I said: "You lie like hell!" and meant it. "You got out of Europe with enough evidence on a spy ring to smash it with your own fist. But their agents caught up with you in Lisbon, so you threw them off the track by giving a phony locket to Sue Adams. Then you beat it back to the States. Over here, you learned that they hadn't gotten Sue's locket; and, not only that, but they were still checking on you. Maybe you did want to get Sue out of the jam. I won't give you any credit for that because you got her into it. And you killed another girl to frame a suicide—"

"She was a spy, too," he cried, and the back of my hand shut him up.

"You tried to polish me off tonight, when you had your hoods kidnap Sue and plant the dead girl, because you didn't want me to get wise to the play. Then you had me pinched for murder to serve a double purpose—to get me out of the way and to make the spy agents believe that their stuff was in police hands. But you had copies, so you didn't care."

I lit a cigarette, not taking my eyes from him, and spoke through a cloud of smoke.

"You could have been a hero, Vinnie Southard. You took a chance few men would take. You had enough stuff to either save your country or to smash it to hell! But you couldn't see it that way. You could only see what it was worth to you. You saw thousands if you could peddle that stuff to the right people. As blackmail, you had a set-up. You could shake down all those big names you held for thousands more. So you held out. And that's worse than selling your country down the river!"

I took another drag on the cigarette, and it was one time when the tale about a cigarette being a nail in your coffin looked true.

Southard sprang from the couch with the fury of a cornered cat. His feet caught me in the stomach. The air exploded from my lungs! Pain lanced through my body, and I couldn't grasp my breath. Then he was on top of me, his fists beating

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against my head, his knees gouging me. The pain came back into my leg again, and my side was a searing flame. I worked my arms loose from under him and shot a cross to his face. He rolled off, and I started after him. I couldn't move. My legs were lead. That pain!

I just lay there, gasping for breath. fighting the pain that held me, and not caring about the pain. All I knew was hate for this man, if you could have called that thing before me a man, and praying to be able to get my hands on him. Just once!

And then he had turned from a dresser drawer. There was a gun in his fist, a big automtaic with its muzzle yawning death at my head.

"You weren't smart enough, shamus," Southard was saying. "But perhaps you're smart enough to know that people who get in my way—die! And you're in my way." He started backing toward the door.

I wondered when he was going to shoot that damn thing. I was hoping he'd shoot straight. It would be hell to hear the thing go off and not die; to have to wait for another; to have to—

I closed my eyes and shook as I heard the crash above me. And I thought that was funny because I couldn't feel anything. They say sometimes it is like that; you don't feel anything.

And then a voice was saying: "Not tonight, sonny," and there was a shot and then two more, fast!

I opened my eyes and saw Tom Moran standing there, his gun smoking. I raised myself on my elbows and saw Vinnie Southard writhing and thrashing about on the floor, holding a shattered arm, his leg running with crimson.

"We've been waiting in the hall for ten minutes," Tom Moran said. "We heard everything. This is our man! And with the stuff in that locket, we'll make a clean-up of every spy outfit from here to the West coast."

I felt like asking him why the devil he had waited out there so long. But I didn't say anything; I just smiled. Then I raised myself to my feet and made my way to a door at the other side of the room. I tried it; it was locked.

I turned to Moran and nodded at Southard. "Take him away, will you, Tom?" I said.

They went out.

I threw myself against the door. I didn't have much strength; but it didn't take much. It went off the hinges. I stood leaning against the jamb where I'd fallen.

Sue Adams rushed across the room to me, and I took her in my arms. She buried her face in my shoulder, and she was crying; and I guess I was crying, too. "Oh, Jerry!" she sobbed, and I twisted my fingers in her long black hair.

"It's all right, Sue," I told her. "Everything's all right, now."

She looked up at me, and her lips trembled and a little tear pearled down her cheek. She said: "Vinnie . . . is he—"

And I realized that she still didn't know that Vinnie Southard was a part of all this. I don't know why, but I decided not to tell her.

I said slowly: "Yes, Sue. Vinnie's gone."

And as we walked out of the apartment, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to give her much chance to think about Vinnie Southard from now on.

THE END.

THE SHADOW NOOSE

By Norman A. Daniels

The hallucination of a hangman's noose was perfect. And Detective Jim Preston found that it could break a man's neck!

CHAPTER I.

THE SEVERED ROPE.

Jim Preston, private detective, wheeled his car into the driveway beside the big, century-old house. He looked at the gables and turrets; the estate itself which had been allowed to grow wild; the creaky storm windows swaying noisily in the evening breeze. High above everything else, Jim Preston saw one

of those old-fashioned tower rooms, round and spired, sticking out like a fat thumb in the darkness.

He walked up to the front door, reached for the brass knocker and hesitated. The door was open about an inch. Preston gave it a push. Nothing happened; no one came to greet him. The big hallway was faintly illuminated by two weak bulbs on the side walls. He saw a staircase, twenty feet wide, rise gracefully to a landing, where it separated, each part leading to a different wing.

Preston opened his mouth to call out. Then he shut it again, promptly, and reached for his gun. Someone was coming downstairs, someone who ran as though forty cloven-hoofed devils were after him.

The man appeared on the east-wing landing and without a pause, came on down the steps. He was tall, thin and had gray hair. His eyes were round in horror, his face a strange beet-red color and—what made Preston blink more than ever—there was a rope around the man's neck! One end of it trailed behind him like a long tail.

He saw Preston and raced up to him. "Help me! They're trying to kill me. They tried to hang me!"

Preston seized the man by one shoulder and shook him hard. "Snap out of it, mister. I'm Jim Preston, private dick. A man named Bundy phoned my office and said he wanted to hire me."

The tall man wilted, clinging feebly to Preston's arm. "Yes . . . yes, I'm Sig Bundy. I phoned you. Thank heavens, you came so soon. I . . . I want to sit down. Help me . . . into the library. There, on your right. Thanks. Now, a drink. Brandy on the sideboard. Have one, yourself."

Preston poured only one drink. He eyed the rope still dangling from Bundy's neck. It was expertly fashioned like a hangman's noose. Bundy took the drink, downed it in two gulps and seemed to feel a little better.

"You . . . you can see that I wasn't fooling when I said my life was in danger. Preston, I've heard of your reputation as a tough investigator, a man without nerves. I'll pay you thirty dollars a day just to stay with me. It's this house. There's something the matter with it. Ghosts, maybe. I don't know; I never believed in them myself."

"Why don't you move out?" Preston queried.

"No! No, I can't. I've never run away from anything in my life. Look, Preston, I've been here about two months. Until a week ago it was peaceful. Just what I wanted. Then things began to happen. I . . . I saw the shadows of a hangman's noose! It appeared two or three times every night. Yet, I couldn't find out what caused that shadow. At first, I thought it was—well, my imagination. Then it began to drive me mad, so I phoned you."

Preston picked up the rope and removed it from Bundy's neck. "What about this?" he asked. "I'm not holding any shadow in my hands right now."

Bundy shivered. "Yes, I know. I heard something move upstairs. I followed the source of the sound to the tower room. When I opened the door, there was some moonlight streaming through a window. I saw another of those shadow ropes. I went to seize it because the hallucination was perfect. It looked just like a real noose. Then a real noose dropped over my head and the floor went out from under me! I dropped about a foot or so—not enough to break my neck. Rafters under the

floor saved me, I guess."

Preston frowned. He could see the welt around Bundy's throat. That hadn't been faked.

"Then you cut the rope," he said. "Lucky you had a knife on you and presence of mind enough to use it."

"That's just it." Bundy half arose from his chair. "I didn't have a knife. I didn't cut the rope! Just when things became black and I thought I was done for, the noose loosened. Somebody else cut that rope, Preston. Somebody I couldn't see!"

Preston let go of the rope. "That's funny," he said slowly. "If someone wanted to hang you, why should that person cut the rope? Unless there are two opposing forces in the house, one seeking to kill you and the other protecting you. Let's have a look at the tower room."

Bundy didn't want to go up, but the look of Preston's broad shoulders and the gun he held lent some reassurance. Preston led the way. They reached the tower, and Preston kicked the door open. There was nobody inside the small, circular room. There were rafters above, but no signs of a rope.

Bundy pointed to the floor. "See there—the floor has been cut out to form a trapdoor. Like a . . . a scaffold where they hang murderers."

Preston knelt on the floor and saw that Bundy was right. But he couldn't open that trap. It seemed to be held by some device hidden beneath it.

"In the morning," he said, "I'll tear this floor up, if necessary. Right now, I think we ought to get back downstairs. You're sure nobody else is in the house."

"Nobody that belongs here," Bundy declared. "I live alone. I didn't even want servants; just peace and quiet. I've searched the house, too, several times. Not a trace of an intruder."

They returned to the big library. Preston sat down and lit a cigarette. Bundy puffed on a pipe.

Preston said: "If someone is trying to kill you, Mr. Bundy, there must be a reason. What is it?"

"I don't know. I swear that's the truth," Bundy said. "When I rented the place, the agent acted oddly and I named my own price. He seemed glad to lease it at any figure. Maybe the place is haunted."

"Nonsense," Preston rejected the idea flatly. "When a ghostly phenomenon presents itself, there is always a human agency behind it all. What I can't understand is why the murderer tried to hang you and then cut the rope. I'll stay here with you. The rate you quoted is satisfactory enough. I want to see one of those shadow nooses. I—What's the matter, Bundy?"

Bundy just raised one hand and pointed. Preston swiveled around in his chair, and his eyes grew wide and round. There, on the wall behind him, was a circular spot of light, and in the center of it was a noose—a hangman's rope—swaying gently.

Preston made a dive in the direction of the shadow. It disappeared instantly. He stood there, trying to figure out what had caused this to appear. Such a perfectly formed noose couldn't have been caused by a dangling window-shade cord or a loose portiere tie-back. There were three windows in the room. It might have originated from outside. He started toward the windows and then the brass knocker on the front door sent reverberating echoes through the ancient house.

Preston hid the gun behind his

hip, walked to the door and motioned Bundy to stay clear in case the visitor would announce himself by shooting. Preston flung the door wide, and then he relaxed. A man, about five feet one or two inches tall and weighing no more than a hundred pounds, stood on the porch. He kept rubbing his hands and seemed to be on the point of exploding.

"Are you Mr. Bundy?" he asked, then, without waiting for a reply, went on talking. "Well, something's got to be done about those men camped on your property, just over the line from mine. You can't hear or see them; but I can. I live here because of the quiet. Those men are constantly practicing with guns. They've almost driven me—"

"Wait a minute," Preston cut in. "What kind of guns? Rifles?"

"No, revolvers. Automatics, maybe; I'm not sure. But they must be put off this property. They and their car and trailer, too."

Preston said, "Come inside, Mr.—"

"Verdera—Otto Verdera. I've lived next door for years. Not that I like it, mind you. Living next to a ghost house, unoccupied most of the time—"

"Ghost house?" Bundy gasped. "Did . . . did you say ghosts?"

Verdera looked from one man to the other until Preston identified himself and Bundy. Then Verdera told about the ghost house, as though he relished every word; but Preston noticed that he kept looking around nervously and sat on the edge of his chair as if he were ready to take off at the first clank of a chain or sound of a hollow groan.

"This house is a hundred and forty years old. It belonged to a family whose head was the official hangman. He hung a lot of people in his day, and, finally, he hung himself. His son took over from there, lasted a couple of years and hung himself, too. Both committed suicide in the tower room, that spire you can see even from way off."

"That's history," Preston said. "I want facts about modern times. There haven't been any professional hangmen living here during the past couple of years."

"There hasn't been anyone living here for the last twenty years, except off and on," Verdera answered quickly. "Maybe half a dozen families moved in and moved right out again the next day. Don't ask me why. They never stayed long enough to make any explanations. But I know those hangmen took their own lives. They're living in a world between life and death because they're afraid to really die. Too many people whose necks they stretched are waiting for them. They have no where to go, so they stay in this house."

Preston wrinkled his nose. "You probably believe in werewolves and banshees, too. However, those sharpshooters you spoke about interest me. Know about them, Bundy?"

Bundy could hardly talk. "N-No! I gave nobody permission to camp on the estate. I don't want to stay here alone, Preston. Don't leave me here."

Preston headed for the door. "Verdera will stay here while I have a look at the guys in that trailer."

CHAPTER II.

ROPE'S VICTIM!

Preston stopped by his car and got a flashlight. On impulse, he dumped an extra clip of cartridges into his pocket, too. Then he headed toward Verdera's house.

It proved to be about half as big as Bundy's, which still left it in the mansion class. There were lights in many of the windows, and Preston saw a man step onto the porch for a second or two. He seemed to be a servant.

Rounding the house, Preston saw the car and trailer. It was a de luxe job with electric lights and all. One man sat in a chair, tilted back against the trailer wall. He was smoking a cigarette, and the glow kept winking at Preston.

He suddenly stepped in front of the man, saw him start forward, reach for a gun and mutter a curse at the same time. Preston gave him no chance to get the weapon. He grabbed the man by the throat, yanked him to his feet and pushed him hard against the trailer.

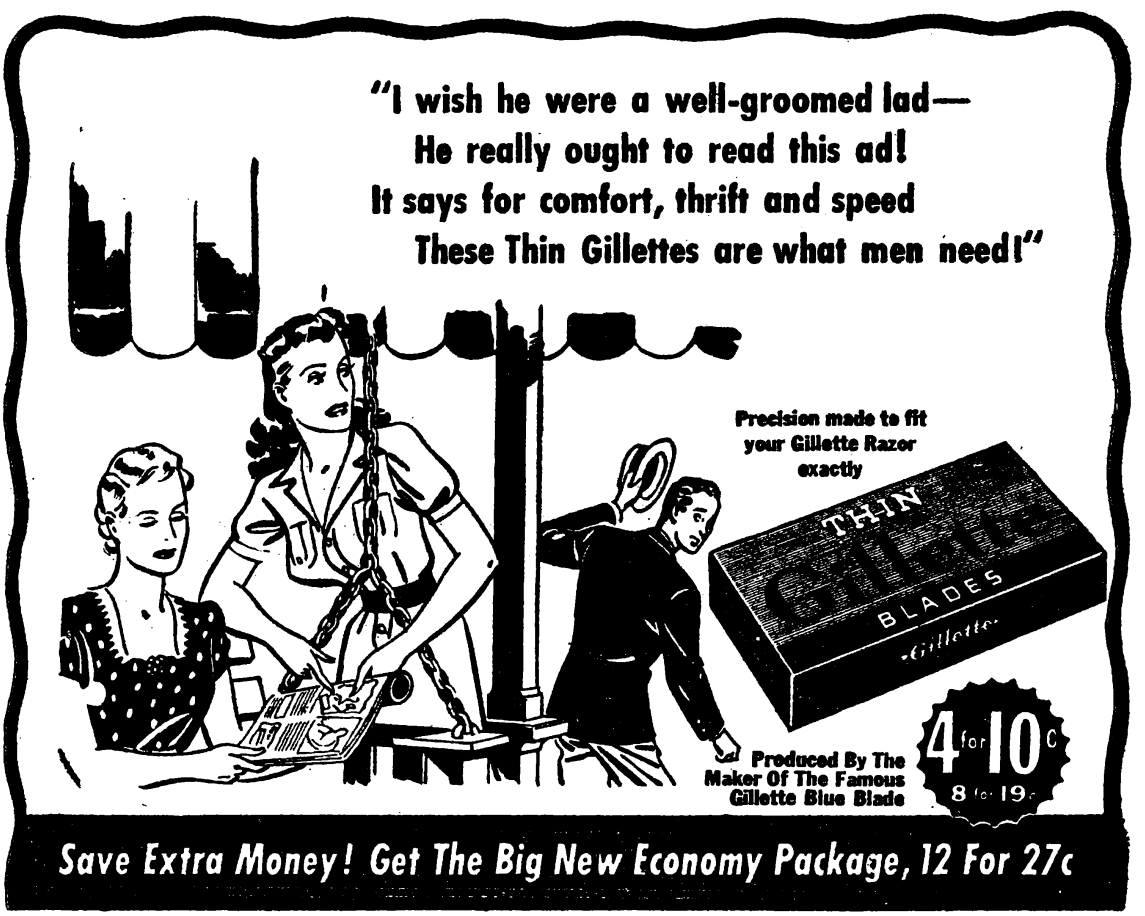
"Drop your hand," he snapped. "If you so much as lay a finger on your roscoe, I'll choke the daylights out of you. Listen, punk, you're a type that belongs on Sixth Avenue, not here, forty miles from the city."

"We . . . I was just taking an auto trip." The man wriggled free of Preston's grasp. "What right have you got to ask questions, anyhow?"

"A camping trip that lasts for forty miles and then bogs down for a few days? Get a better line than that, pal, and start talking fast. Who are you? Where's your friend?"

"I . . . I ain't got no friend. My name is—" he looked into Preston's eyes and decided to tell the truth—Carding. You act like a copper so there ain't no use bluffing. Sure, I did time. So what? I ain't even on parole, now."

Preston grabbed Carding's coat and ripped it open, heedless of the



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buttons that flew off. He yanked a .38 automatic out of a shoulder clip.

"An ex-con, carrying a rod. Brother, this can put you back in stir so fast you won't remember leaving the place. You'll talk turkey or I'll see to it that you do go back. What are you pestering Sig Bundy for?"

Carding just gaped. "I dunno what you're talking about. Who is this guy, Bundy?"

Preston let go of the man. "All right," he said harshly. "You hook that trailer up and dust, get me? I'll come back in a couple of hours, and if you're still here—well, use your imagination."

Preston turned on his heel and walked away. When he reached the brush, he hurled the automatic into the night and kept going toward Bundy's house, crossing some rather wild territory. There seemed to be no paths, and he used his flashlight almost constantly. Once or twice branches crackled somewhere nearby and brought him to a sudden stop, but Preston was no woodsman. When the sounds were not repeated, he shrugged and went on.

He could see the outlines of the tower room, projecting above the tree tops when the attack came!

Someone shot out from behind a thick bush. Preston felt his legs encircled by powerful arms. He toppled forward. The flashlight flew from his grasp, hit the ground and

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went out. Then Preston began to fight viciously, because two men were attacking him. One swung a gun, trying to break Preston's skull open with the butt! He dodged this blow, parried with two fast ones to a face and sent one man reeling backward.

The other leaped high, landed on Preston's shoulders and did his best to gouge out his eyes! Preston reached up, grabbed the man by the neck and tugged. The man flew over

Preston looked down through the trapdoor. A body dangled at the end of the rope, and the victim's neck had been broken.

his head, crashed to the ground and didn't move. The other assailant was on his feet though and this time he held his gun in a position for firing.

It lanced flame and death. Preston dropped flat, whipping out his own gun at the same time. He held his fire. In the darkness, there was no target. He reached out, seized a thin limb of a bush and bent it as far away from himself as possible. Then he made it rustle gently against other limbs.

Instantly the killer opened up, aiming just to Preston's left. Preston shifted his gun and fired twice. A howl of pain indicated he hadn't missed. Then someone went crashing through the darkness, stumbling and falling every now and then. Preston looked toward the spot where the second attacker had fallen. He seemed to be gone, though, in the darkness, Preston wasn't sure.

Gun ready, he moved toward the spot. The man had disappeared all right. Preston saw his flash, picked it up and replaced the ruined bulb with a spare carried in the end of the flash. He spent a few minutes looking for the men who had tried to kill him. Once, he saw some blood on the trunk of a tree—wet, fresh blood.

Then the silence was shattered by a wild shriek. It came from the house, and Preston went there on the double. Bundy was on the porch, yelling in a high pitched, terrorized voice. He saw Preston and ran toward him.

"Why didn't you stay in the house? What did you run away for? I'm paying you to protect me!"

"What happened?"

"There's a . . . a dead man in the tower. He's hanging, just as I hung a little while ago; only nobody cut him down. He's dead!"

Preston started up the stairs. "Where is Verdera?"

"He went home. He said he couldn't stand the place even when he wasn't alone. Right after he left, I heard this sound and I went upstairs."

Preston reached the tower room. All he saw was a taut rope, spinning slowly. He went to the trapdoor and looked down. A body dangled at the end of the rope, and the victim's neck had been broken.

The beam of his flash centered on the dead man's face, and Preston gulped.

It was Carding, the crook he'd found beside the trailer no more than fifteen minutes ago.

Bundy plucked at Preston's sleeve. "I . . . I can't stay in this house another minute. I have to leave or I'll go mad. I—No, I can't leave! It's impossible. I won't leave. But you've got to protect me, do you hear? If I'm alive tomorrow morning, I'll pay you one thousand dollars. Then I'll leave."

Preston didn't answer. He examined the trapdoor through which Carding had dropped. It worked on a latch which apparently could be set from beneath so that sometimes the trapdoor could be walked across while at other times it would give way. Oddly enough, the room below, into which the corpse had dropped, had a beamed ceiling; and one section of these beams had dropped with the trap.

"Bundy," Preston said sharply, "you told me you went through this trap and that somebody cut the rope before you strangled. But how come your neck wasn't broken like Carding's is?"

"Carding? Did you say Carding?" Bundy sagged weakly. Then he

seemed to regain possession of his wits. "I don't know anybody by that name. What was a stranger doing in my house? Why wasn't my neck broken? I told you—I landed on those beams. They stopped my fall. But why didn't they stop this man's fall, too? How was he killed when I lived?"

"Let's go down to the room under this tower," Preston suggested. "I'll violate a few laws by cutting the body down. We'll explain that we didn't know the man was dead. Maybe Carding has something in his pockets."

Bundy didn't enter the room. He remained in the corridor, dry-washing his hands until Preston thought they'd start bleeding if he kept it up. Preston cut down the corpse, laid it on the floor and methodically went through the pockets. The gun holster was still empty. And to further assure him that he hadn't mistaken the man's identity, the buttons on his coat were missing; Preston remembered tearing them off. In one pocket, he found a wallet, without cash, but containing several name cards. He studied these, and his eyes narrowed.

Bundy was waiting outside. Preston piloted him to the library, shoved him into a chair and poured the shaking man another drink of brandy.

"Those beams which supported you dropped with the trap when Carding went through," he said. "It was arranged that way. Those beams had been cut in two. Now, Bundy, you recognized Carding's name when I first mentioned it; then you denied knowing him. Do you or don't you know that rat?"

"I never saw him before in my life," Bundy declared.

Preston flipped a name card on the table. "Then what was Carding carrying around your name card

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for? And why did you write the address of this place on it? You'd better talk, Bundy. The cops won't be in your pay, and they might get a little rough."

"I never gave Carding my name card," Bundy insisted. "I never saw the man before. You've got to believe me."

Preston shrugged, adjusted his hat and started for the door. "So long, Bundy. I'll read the papers tomorrow with great interest. Maybe your obituary will be there. Oh, yes, I'll contact the cops about Carding. Good night."

Bundy shot out of his chair and clawed Preston's arm. "No! Don't go and leave me. They'll murder me! Those damned ghosts. I'll be hanging in the tower room tomorrow. I know I will. Stay! You've got to stay. I'll pay two thousand dollars for just one night's work. I'll pay anything!"

Preston walked back into the middle of the room. "Then give me the truth. What's this all about? Why did you come to this forsaken spot? Who is after you? What are you hiding from?"

Bundy gulped. "I'm not hiding. I swear it. I haven't done a thing. It's this house—ghosts. Didn't you hear what Verdera said? Nobody ever stayed here. It means death! But I can't go, now. I just can't. In the morning, when it's daylight—then I can go. Ghosts don't appear in daylight. Two thousand dollars, Preston. You'd work six months to make that, and I'm offering it for just one night's work."

Preston thought of a stack of overdue bills in his desk drawer. They, more than Bundy's pleadings, made up his mind. He knew that Bundy lied, but that was none of his business. He was a private dick, not handicapped by the rules of a regular detective.

"All right," he said, "I'll stay."

CHAPTER III.

THE DOUBLE CROSS.

Bundy mopped his forehead and hit the brandy bottle again. Preston sat down to think. Why had Carding entered the house? Why had he been killed when he was obviously one of the pair intent on frightening Bundy to death or possibly using a more direct and faster means of eliminating him? Bundy, of course, knew why they were doing this; but whatever the reason, it must involve Bundy criminally.

Preston arose and handed Bundy his gun. "You sit right here. If one of those shadow nooses appears on the wall, face in the opposite direction from it and start shooting. I'll be in the tower room."

Preston hesitated as he passed through the hallway. Then, with a grunt, he located the cellar door, went down the steps and searched the workbench in one corner. He found several rusty tools and took a couple of them with him. They were concealed beneath his coat when he reached the first floor again. He found Bundy in the hallway, more nervous than ever. Bundy held the detective's gun, and its muzzle covered Preston.

"What . . . what were you doing down there?" Bundy demanded. "Why did you go into the cellar?"

Preston gently pushed the gun aside. "Because if there is a killer in the house, he might be hiding in the cellar as well as any other place. I've got two thousand bucks wrapped up in you, Bundy. I don't want to lose it."

He turned on his heel and went upstairs to the tower room. The trapdoor was still open, and the severed length of rope dangled through the aperture. Preston found a chair and went to work. For ten minutes he was very busy, but he kept an ear cocked for trouble downstairs.

Finally he finished his job and returned to the first floor, moving softly. Bundy wasn't in the library. Preston saw the cellar door ajar; and, as he started toward it, he heard someone coming up the stairs, obviously trying to be as quiet about it as possible.

Just as Preston got set to make a dive for the man, he saw that it was Bundy. Preston relaxed, but Bundy seemed to become half mad with rage.

"You slipped up on me purposely," he yelled. "You've been spying on me ever since you came. I'm not even sure you are the detective I called. Maybe you're one of those crooks like Carding—"

Preston stepped close and took the gun from Bundy's pocket. He noticed that the man's hands were covered with fresh dirt. His shoes were loaded with the stuff, too.

"Look, Mr. Bundy," he said patiently. "I don't know what this is all about. You refuse to tell me why there have been attempts made on your life. You knew Carding; yet you deny it. Normally, I should dust my knuckles against that beak of yours and pull out of here, but I'm working for two thousand dollars and I'm going to earn it. Maybe, though, you will answer a few questions. This man Verdera—do you know anything about him?"

"No, I never saw him before. But he's Verdera, all right. The agent who rented me this place told me about him; said he was a little guy, just a bit taller than a midget. Said he'd lived next door for years."

"Thanks," Preston grunted, "for that much dope anyway. It puts Verdera in the clear. Now, we'll sit

down and wait for developments. It will be morning in a few hours, and I'll help you get your stuff out of here then."

"No!" Bundy shouted. "No, I'm not afraid when it's daylight. The . . . the ghosts can't come then; no shadows of hangmen's nooses. I'll be all right as soon as it's light. I don't want you to stay after that."

Preston shrugged and headed toward the big hallway at the front of the house. Bundy trailed directly behind him. Preston felt a cool breeze, glanced at the front door and saw that it was half open. Someone had entered the house. He reached for his gun and froze.

"That's right, copper," a harsh voice said, "you know what the muzzle of a roscoe feels like when it's dug into your ribs, don't you? You and Bundy walk into the library and we'll have a little talk."

Preston felt his automatic removed from its holster. Then, with Bundy at his side, they walked into the library Bundy didn't walk; he staggered. His face was ashen, his lips blue with fear. Preston turned around slowly. His captor proved to be a lithe, nattily dressed man with a thin, cruel face. He had put his own gun away and held Preston's trained on him.

"No use dirtying my gun," he laughed. "So you're the big-shot dick who killed my partner, huh? Know what it's going to get you? A bellyful of lead. After you're taken care of, Mr. Bundy and I will talk a little; and if he shows sense, maybe he'll go on living. Here it comes, copper."

Preston teetered forward on the balls of his feet. This killer meant to shoot and Preston wasn't going to simply stand there and take it.

Then an amazing thing happened. Bundy gave a yelp, side-stepped toward a table and scooped up a book end. He hurled this straight at the armed man!

The gunman ducked the missile, and Preston had the one chance he had prayed for. With a roar, he charged forward! One hand knocked the automatic out of the killer's grasp, the other smashed against his face. The man ground out an oath, backed away and defended himself with surprising skill. Preston took several painful jabs before he closed with the man. The tide changed, then, because Preston was heavier and more powerful. He kept forcing the killer back, inflicting punishment with each step. Suddenly, the man whirled and raced for the door, through it and, before Preston could get started, vanished into the night.

Preston went out to look for him, but it was a vain hunt. He stopped beside his car for a couple of minutes, then returned to the house.

Preston yawned and stretched, saw his gun on the floor and picked it up.

"Well, all we've got to do now is wait for morning. Of course, Bundy, when you say it's all over then—well, that can't be. There's a little matter of a corpse upstairs. I've got to report it, and I'd advise you to be here when the police arrive. They'll pick you up if you're not."

Bundy wet his lips. "I . . . I forgot all about Carding. That's all right. I'll stay, but don't call the police tonight. I don't feel very good. Think I'll get a little air. No, you stay here. I've got you into enough trouble already. I'll be all right."

Bundy left the room and walked out on the porch. He remained there for about five minutes; then

Preston heard the front door close. Bundy didn't come into the room, but he whispered hoarsely:

"Preston—there's somebody here. Preston, where are you?"

Preston, gun nestled comfortably in his hand, hurried to where Bundy was standing in the hallway.

Bundy pointed to a closed door. "I'm sure I saw someone step into the closet," he explained. "It was just like a shadow, but something went in there."

Preston moved toward the closet door. "Stand back," he warned Bundy. "Maybe this time we've got the killer cold."

He seized the doorknob and gave it a tug. The door opened easily. Preston got his flashlight out and sent its beam into the darkness. All he saw were supplies and household equipment—brooms, a vacuum cleaner, some old furniture. The closet was spacious; but at a glance, Preston saw that no one could be hiding there.

Bundy peered over his shoulder. "I forgot to tell you that after the man went inside, I distinctly heard a clicking sound, as if a secret panel—"

Preston stepped into the closet, walked up to the further wall and began tapping on it.

Suddenly, the door slammed shut and a key turned! Preston made a dive for the door. He heard Bundy start running away and his direction seemed to be toward the cellar.

"The little double-crossing bum," Preston growled. "That was a trick to get me in here. There's no secret panel. Well, I'll be out before Bundy can complete his trick."

Preston drew back and hurled himself at the door. He bounced back and almost fell. His shoulder ached from the terrific impact—and the door hadn't even rattled. He tried it again. The confines of the closet prevented him from really

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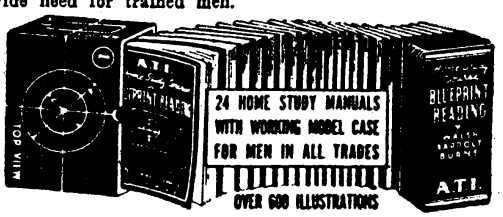

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working up a good rushing attack, and he gave up this method of trying to escape.

But he still had his gun. He drew it, placed the muzzle against the lock and pulled the trigger. There was just a metallic click. He tried again with the same result. Then he cursed, laid the flashlight on a shelf so that its beam shone downward and pulled the cartridge clip out of the gun. It was empty.

"Bundy's work," Preston groaned. "He was the only person who had the gun long enough to take out the bullets. No wonder he wasn't afraid of that killer."

CHAPTER IV.

THE NOOSE.

Preston examined the lock intently. There was little hope of breaking it other than by a bullet. The door itself formed an impossible barrier; and while he was imprisoned here, Bundy was getting away, leaving him to take the brunt of the whole affair.

Then Preston grunted and reached into his coat pocket. He remembered that he'd dropped another clip of bullets there. With a grin, he snapped the fresh clip into the gun and blasted away at the lock. It took four slugs to do the trick and then some hefty shoving, but finally Preston catapulted into the hallway.

He hurried to the cellar door, ran down the steps and looked around. There was no sign of Bundy, but he did see that some time in the past a well had been dug in the cellar. It had been sealed up, but Bundy seemed to have opened it for some reason or other. Preston walked over to it and saw that a ladder had been dropped into its depths. That was where Bundy had gotten his hands and shoes covered with fresh soil. He'd been down in that pit.

On a hunch, Preston raced back

upstairs, out onto the porch and across it to look at the driveway. His car was gone! But there was a garage at the rear. Possibly, Bundy had a car of his own there, but took Preston's because it was quicker than moving the sedan out of the driveway. Preston prepared to vault the railing.

Then he heard a faint yell, like a scream of terror. It came from inside the house. Wheeling fast, he darted for the door and sped through it. As he entered, the scream came again, from upstairs. He took the steps three at a time, kept on going till he reached the tower room.

He slowed up as he neared the room of death, where a man had met his doom with a broken neck; where Bundy had gone through the trap, only to have been saved by some mysterious rescuer who cut the rope. Preston was wondering whether or not that yarn had been originated in Bundy's mind without fact to back it up.

He opened the door. The room was empty. He saw that the trapdoor had been returned to its normal position. Then he gave a start of horror. Outlined against the further wall was a noose, gently swaying, tantalizing him until he started toward it.

Apparently, Preston forgot all about the trapdoor. He stepped squarely upon it. There was a swishing sound above him. A noose came down and circled around his neck! And at the same instant the trapdoor opened beneath his feet.

Preston went catapulting down! The rope stretched to its full length. There was a cracking sound and the section of beam to which the rope was attached, gave way.

Then, from the rafters of the tower room, came a diminutive figure. It was Verdera, his face a mask

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of hatred. He took a quick look at the rafter which had broken and saw that it had been neatly sawed until a slight weight would have pulled the section away. The marks of the saw had also been cleverly filled in with putty, colored to resemble the wood itself.

Verdera dropped lightly to the floor, whipped out a gun and sped toward the door. He went down the steps as fast as his short legs would carry him; then, as he neared the room into which the trapdoor had dropped its victim, he slowed up, leveled the gun and darted inside.

He saw a form lying prone on the floor and his gun sent jagged streaks of lightning and death through the gloom! Verdera muttered something and backed up a few paces.

Suddenly a hand reached over his shoulder and wrested the gun out of his grasp. Another hand closed around his throat and picked him up bodily. He blinked in the ray of a flashlight and saw Preston behind it.

"That was your first victim you plugged, Verdera," Preston said. "You forgot about Carding, didn't you? What were you after? What did Bundy sneak out of this house?"

Verdera's feet touched the floor. He groaned and massaged his neck. Preston thrust a hand, fingers outspread, toward the little man's neck again. Verdera drew back with a cry of alarm.

"No . . . no! Don't choke me! Don't do that. I'll talk. I'll tell you everything. I was only trying to prevent Bundy from making away with a quarter of a million dollars in jewels. He had them hidden somewhere. I couldn't find the place."

"So you tried to frighten him into taking his loot and running away. Then you could grab him. O. K., Verdera, that story sounds logical when I check it against the other facts. Carding and that other crook came up here to get the stuff away from Bundy. You're in with them; you acted as the inside man."

"No," Verdera cried hoarsely. "I overheard them talking in their trailer one night. I knew then that Bundy had a fortune cached away in this house and I wanted it. The jewels are part of his brother's stock, removed from a big jewelry store so that the brother could declare himself bankrupt. Bundy was hiding the stuff. He's as much a crook as Carding and his friend. I went to the house because I knew you were there. I hoped you'd get rid of those men."

"And you—don't forget to include yourself," Preston grunted. "What happened to Carding's friend?"

"He's in the trailer. I . . . I managed to drug a bottle of whiskey he always drank from."

Preston's outstretched fingers clamped into a mighty fist. "You're a little guy, Verdera," he said gruffly, "and I believe in picking on people my size; but this is an emergency."

The fist shot forward and Verdera passed out. Preston draped the little man over one shoulder and hurried out of the house via the back door.

He went to the garage, found that his hunch was right. A coupê was there. He tossed Verdera inside, got behind the wheel and drove to the road. He stopped, got out and looked for tire marks. Bundy had been in a hurry and skidded on the turn. The marks indicated he'd headed north, so Preston took the same direction.

Twenty minutes later he saw his sedan parked just off the road. He kept on going. Then he saw Bundy,

frantically jerking his thumb for a ride. Preston braked the car fast. Bundy suddenly recognized his own coupê and started running. Preston raised his gun and sent a slug whining just above the fleeing man's head. Bundy dropped a sack he carried and threw up both hands.

"Pick up the stuff," Preston ordered, "then walk back here and do it nice and easy. I don't think you're armed; but if so, remember that I can shoot fast and straight."

Bundy started talking so rapidly that his words tumbled over one another. "I didn't kill . . . anybody. I . . . I went to see Carding about selling the jewels. They belong to my brother, but he's in prison. I needed the money. I gave Carding my card and told him to contact me here."

"Sure," Preston grunted, "Carding promised you all kinds of dough, then notified his pal; and they started out to get the gems for nothing. You were in no position to yell for help. Concealing assets of a bankrupt automatically slates you for a prison term with your brother. Carding found out where you were and came here. But Verdera heard Carding plan a method of attack and took a hand himself. He wanted to frighten you so you'd dig up the jewels and run for it. That was the only way a runt like him would have been able to get his hands on the stuff. He threw those shadow nooses around by means of a small, weak flashlight. He simply swung a miniature noose in front of the lens and created a lifelike shadow. He showed the beam through open windows, or other holes he'd made in the walls of the house. Verdera just took advantage of the fact that your house had a grisly history.

"Then he tried his masterpiece. He actually dropped a noose around your neck, but he arranged things so you didn't drop far enough to

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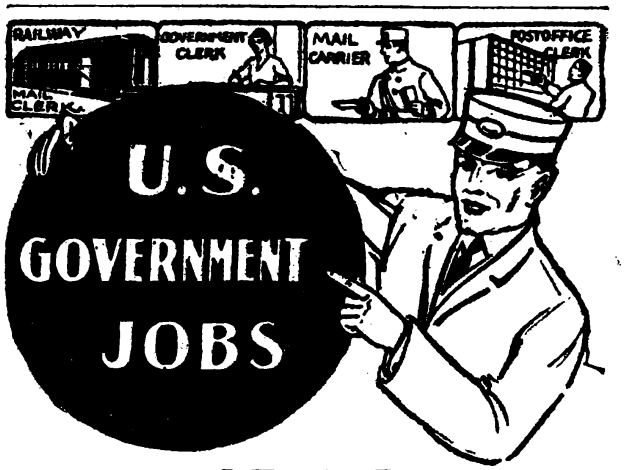

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break your neck. He cut you loose, then, and got out fast. If I hadn't showed up, you'd surely have taken the jewels and run for it."

"He . . . he killed Carding, too?" Bundy asked.

"Sure, he did. Those two crooks were ready to act, and Verdera had to forestall them so he waited until after I batted Carding around. Then he lured him to the tower room, probably by telling him the loot was there. I had an idea Verdera was behind it because he was small enough to crawl up onto those rafters and hide. There, he could manipulate the rope and the trapdoor without exposing himself. That's why I sawed the beam in the tower room, so that, if I were caught in that trap, I'd have a chance."

Bundy gulped. "Thanks for exposing him. I . . . I'll pay you five thousand dollars not to say anything about the gems."

"So I'd go to jail with you?" Preston grinned. "Nothing doing. I'm taking Verdera into town on murder charges and you on charges of abetting your brother in concealing assets of his business. But you owe me two thousand dollars, Bundy. It's just dawn, and you're still alive. You'll pay, too, or I'll take it out of your hide."

Preston grabbed the man and piloted him back to the car. He jammed him inside with Verdera who was still unconscious. Preston got behind the wheel, patted the sack of gems in his lap and grinned.

I didn't know what you possessed that those mugs wanted," he told Bundy. "But I had an idea you might run out on me, so when I chased Carding's pal a little while ago, I stopped by my car long enough to drain the gas tank. You were running on the fuel in the carburetor, and I knew it wouldn't take you far."

THE END.

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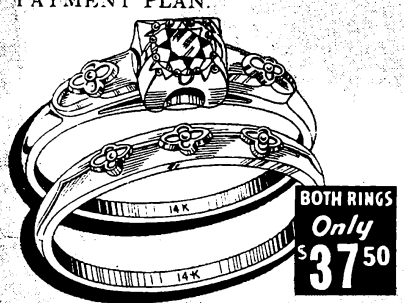

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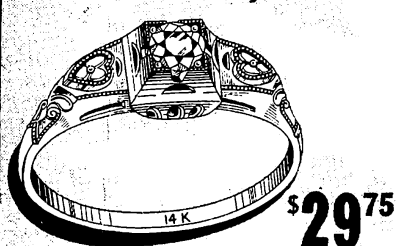

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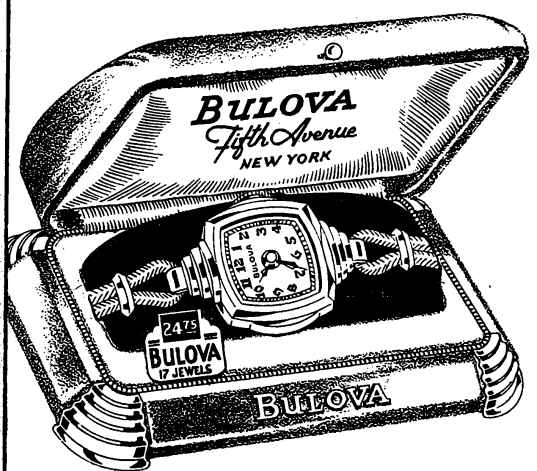

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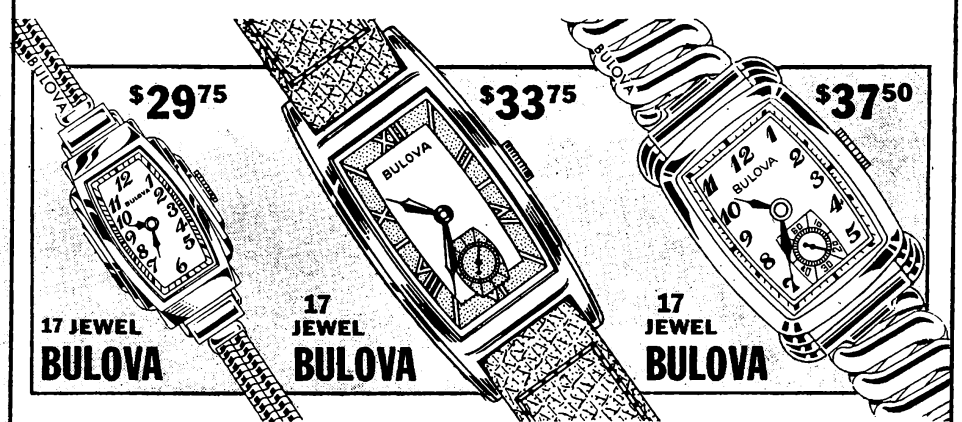

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